

SWEET & SWOONWORTHY BILLIONAIRES

Chaperoning THE Billionaire



LAURIE BAXTER

CHAPERONING THE
BILLIONAIRE

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

LAURIE BAXTER

ZUZU BAILEY BOOKS

Copyright © 2023 by Laurie Baxter

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, stored, or utilized in any form or by any means, now known or hereafter invented, including but not limited to photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, in any format such as print, audio, digital, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The identification of certain real-world businesses as settings in the narrative is for artistic and storytelling purposes only and does not imply an endorsement by or an affiliation with those establishments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks once again to my editor, Chrissy Wolfe, without whom I would never know just how bad at punctuation I am. And thanks to my friends and family for your continued support, even (especially?) if you don't quite get why I would want to write such a thing.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

New York Minute

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

New York Minute

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

New York Minute

Chapter 15

New York Minute

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

New York Minute

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

New York Minute

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

New York Minute

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[New York Minute](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank You](#)

[\(Later at Sabrina & Noah's Wedding ...\)](#)

[Sweet & Swoonworthy Billionaire Bonus](#)

[Books by Laurie Baxter](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

“*I*’m sorry, Victoria. I know it’s short notice.”

It was, in fact, a matter of hours. But it wasn’t that.

After all, it wasn’t that surprising that a man as busy as Davis King would call to cancel their date at the last minute. Especially considering he was on the other side of the country in San Francisco.

She’d known from the outset that cultivating a romantic relationship with a workaholic who lived three thousand miles away wasn’t going to be easy. But Davis’s commitment to his family’s entertainment empire had been one of his biggest appeals.

The steadfast work ethic was something they had in common. And when they had collaborated on a charity project involving one of the King theme parks last year, they had hit it off. Not to mention, Davis ticked nearly all the boxes on Vicky’s list. (Yes, she had a list. The best way to get what you want is to be methodical.) Given all that, the distance had seemed like a mere inconvenience. But today not so much. Because today was the Pink Heart Ball, New York’s premier Valentine’s fundraiser, benefiting women’s heart health.

“I’m disappointed, of course, but I understand,” she said diplomatically.

“Are you sure? I feel terrible. I know how much the night means to you.”

He wasn't wrong. In addition to supporting an important cause and always being an amazing evening, the event drew the elite of the elite. Anyone who wanted to be a power player in the city, whether for profit or, as in her case, for philanthropic purposes, had to be there and at their networking best.

Not to mention, this would be Vicky's first Pink Heart Ball alone. Alone as in unattached, since Noah Prince, her business partner, had ceased to also be her romantic partner. And now, it seemed, alone as in without even a date.

It wasn't that she minded the breakup with Noah. Not anymore anyway. After a year, the wounds were healed, and it was clear to her that they had always been better suited as friends and colleagues. But she was used to having someone at her side at these things. And the media ... Well, they would notice that she showed up alone. It would be the headline.

Meanwhile, "Prince Charming" (the media's nickname for Noah) wasn't even going to be at the Pink Heart Ball this year. He was off on some mysterious getaway with his girlfriend, which left Vicky to represent the Prince Foundation on her own. No pressure.

She knew she was capable. She didn't *need* a successful businessman on her arm to prove herself. Was it so wrong that she felt more secure if she had one, though? And she was eager to strengthen her relationship with Davis. She wanted a man in her life. Business and society were infinitely easier that way, and truthfully, she was lonely.

Enough. Nothing she could do about the situation now.

"Yes, I'm sure, Davis. Really. I'll see you at the World Media Equality Conference in Madrid next month."

He let out a sigh on the other end of the line. "I had to cancel Madrid. Too much at stake with the new film premier. I need to be on-site in LA. I'm sending a representative, of course, but I won't be there in person."

"Oh. Well, all right. Then at the Children's Literacy Summit in April."

He sucked in air. “Actually, I’ll be in Tokyo going over the character design for the new video game that week,” he said apologetically.

Vicky shook her head, laughing. She had liked him *because* he was so committed to his work, she reminded herself. “Well then, perhaps we should just have your assistant text my assistant to keep me apprised of your whereabouts on the globe. I can’t keep up.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea!”

“Oh now, Davis, I *was* kidding. I hardly think we need to involve our employees in our relationship.” She cringed as soon as the word was out of her mouth. *Was* it a relationship? Did he think of it that way? The last thing she wanted was to push him away by being too presumptuous.

“No, no. Not that. But what if ... That is, if you don’t think it’s *too* much ... Well, how would you feel about sharing locations?”

Relief washed over her, followed by confusion. It took her a moment. But she thought she saw where he was going.

She cautiously asked, “You mean as in with our phones?”

“Yes, I mean, if you want to. I don’t know. Is that silly?” He sounded adorably embarrassed. “I just thought—never mind.”

“No! No, I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

It was sweet really. Him wanting to let her know what he was up to at any given time. The sort of thing you only did with those who were more important to you.

They each tapped the necessary settings into their phones. She looked down at the little map on the screen, which now showed her Davis’s location in the King Tower in downtown San Francisco. She smiled to herself. It did make her feel more connected to him somehow.

“I see you,” she announced.

“I see you too,” he said back, his voice low and gentle in her ear.

And for that moment, it almost felt like she wasn't alone.

CHAPTER TWO

Several hours later, Vicky stepped through the entrance of the hotel ballroom and paused to survey the scene. Men in tuxedos, women in evening gowns, classical musicians providing a stirring, romantic soundtrack, champagne, and waltzing couples. Glamour to the hilt.

Vicky, of course, fit right in. She wore her black locks smoothed into elegant waves, and her long, crimson dress draped her lithe figure in lush fabric. Making her look, she knew, every bit like someone out of another time. Like a Golden Age Hollywood starlet walking the red carpet (handy, since she'd just had to walk one on her way in here). It was a trick of her mother's, part of the legacy she'd left her, along with her striking looks. A simple hack: dress like you have all the confidence in the world; the feeling will follow.

And she needed all the confidence she could get tonight.

Of course, her beauty was not in question. If she had to read another glossy magazine article extolling her physical features, she might explode. (She wouldn't, of course. She graciously accepted invitations to be spotlighted on a regular basis, politely slipping in as much as she could about whatever cause the foundation was championing at that moment, using the publicity to its best advantage whenever she could.)

But it didn't exactly make her feel respected as a businesswoman and a force in the charity world when every article spent more space on her eyebrow shape than her latest accomplishment.

Attending this evening's event on her own wasn't helping. Since the breakup with Noah, she may or may not have laid low whenever humanly possible, sending regrets to most of the big events. But she couldn't very well miss the Pink Heart Ball. Especially with her ex-boyfriend/current business partner MIA.

Ugh. Why couldn't Davis have just set aside his amazing work ethic for one evening?

It didn't matter now. She was here. She could do this. She inhaled deeply, poised herself, and let the breath out. Here went nothing.

But just as she began to take a step into the room, she heard raised voices behind her echoing through the hotel lobby.

"Sir, sir! You can't go in there!"

"I can go anywhere I want." Familiar voices. Well, voice. "I'm a *Prince*."

Vicky closed her eyes and counted to—about two and a half as it turned out.

"Sir!" squeaked what could only be the couldn't-be-more-than-twenty-year-old the hotel had foolishly stationed at the door, obviously panicked. There was a flurry of footsteps. "Sir! I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you and your"—he cleared his throat awkwardly—"party to leave."

Why this? Why today? Did she really want to know who was in the "party"? She did not.

"Does he mean *me*?" gasped an offended-sounding but ridiculously squeaky female voice just a few feet behind Vicky now. The voice then let out a *harrumph*, followed by what sounded like aggressive snapping of gum.

A low, rumbling laugh followed, even closer to Vicky, which she felt all through her body. It wasn't her fault. Ryder Prince had that effect on most women, and he often used it to its full advantage. It was how he'd managed to become one of the world's most notorious playboys.

She sighed. Unfortunately, he was a notorious playboy she felt a certain amount of responsibility for. The last thing the Princes—her ex’s parents who were still her friends as well as her employers—needed was to be embarrassed by their elder son crashing an important society event and making trouble.

“Listen, junior,” the man in question was now saying, presumably to the hotel kid, “maybe your superiors didn’t explain this to you too well, but it isn’t your job to piss off the guests at these things, so I suggest you—”

Vicky steeled herself and spun around.

“Oh. Well, hello, Vic.”

Ryder Prince grinned at her as he removed his muscular arm from the kid’s shoulders just in time to keep the poor guy from wetting his pants, as far as she could tell.

“Ryder.”

“Who’s this?” the gum-cracking ingenue said, clearly unimpressed. She appeared to be dressed for clubbing, in fishnets and a very short dress. As were the other two women hanging on Ryder, one in a nearly see-through top, another in not so much a top as what appeared to be a leather bra.

Ryder, though, was in a tux. Which was, let’s say, momentarily distracting. Because troublemaker or not, the man looked awfully good in a tux.

He shook off his groupies and took a step toward her, offering her a lopsided smile.

“How’s it hanging, Vic?”

That was the thing about Ryder. There was no denying his charm, but (mercifully), he usually managed to ruin it once he opened his mouth.

“It’s *hanging* just fine, Ryder. But what are you doing here? Formal charity events aren’t really your thing.”

“I’m expanding my horizons.”

“There’s a line not to be crossed, Ryder. I know you know this. Crashing the Pink Heart Ball is too much. Be reasonable.”

He arched a dark brow. “Come now, princess, we both know Ryder Prince is never reasonable.”

“Are we going in or what, Ryde?” whined see-through-shirt woman. “I’m thirsty. You said there’d be champagne.”

The pubescent hotel kid cleared his throat again. “I’m sorry, but without an invitation—”

“I have an invitation.”

“You do?” Vicky said before she could stop herself.

Ryder reached into his jacket pocket and produced one of the official engraved invitation cards. He grinned at her unconcealed confusion. “The folks got me on the list. Must be hoping for a miraculous transformation.”

He had to be telling the truth. Not only did she not believe Ryder would outright lie, but the guest list to the event was exclusive—invitations were not easy to come by. Someone had to have added him to the list. And no one would have been so foolish as to invite the black sheep of the Prince family without their blessing. Cheryl and Warren must have arranged this themselves.

She wondered what they could have been thinking. But even as she thought this, she realized it had to have been Cheryl and her eternal optimism winning out again. Optimism that definitely would not have imagined Ryder parading around the ball with a mini harem.

“So, what’s it gonna be, Vic? You going to call security and make a scene here?” He waggled his eyebrows at her. The devil.

She took a step closer. She wasn’t about to be intimidated by the likes of him. “Fine. But you come in alone.”

Gum Girl gasped in outrage. “Ryde, tell this slut to get lost.”

Ryder didn’t take his eyes off Vicky. He stayed silent for a minute. Thinking, or maybe just drawing the moment out to try to get to her.

“I don’t travel alone,” he said finally.

“Oh, you won’t be alone. You’ll be with me,” she clarified. It wasn’t like she was dying to have to chaperone an errant bad boy all night, but he was far less likely to cause trouble in there with her than without her, and trying to get him to leave when he didn’t want to would just cause a scene and all the accompanying bad publicity. Cheryl and Warren, not to mention Prince Resort Hotels and the Prince Foundation, definitely did not need that.

“With you?” Ryder raised a brow.

She nodded.

He looked her up and down, considering. She ignored the slight flutter in the stomach this induced.

“Fine,” he said.

“What?” growled Leather Bra.

“Sorry, ladies, I’m afraid the invitation is, officially, just for one. I’m going to have to bid you farewell.”

“Tch. We don’t need this. Come on, girls.” See-Through Shirt led the others away, their stilettos clicking in unison on the floor as they departed.

Ryder turned to the hotel kid, slipping him a hundred-dollar bill. “Put them in a cab to wherever they want to go, would ya?” He slipped him another fifty. “That’s for you.”

“R-right away, sir,” stammered the kid. He ran off after the women.

Ryder pinned his eyes on Victoria. He chuckled. “‘Sir.’ Poor slob has no idea.”

Vicky just looked him up and down before shaking her head. “Come on, then. And you’d better behave yourself.”

He hooked his elbow, holding it out for her to take.

“I always behave myself.” He flashed her a wicked grin. “Of course, it might depend on your definition of behaving.”

“Like a *gentleman*, Ryder.” She took his arm. “I want you to behave like a gentleman.”

“Oh. Well, you should have said.”

Vicky groaned as she let him lead her into the ballroom.

What had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER THREE

Ryder stole a glance at Vicky as they moved through the crowd. She was gorgeous as always, of course. But it was way more than that.

The woman oozed confidence and competence. Always had, ever since he'd met her, back when she was twelve and still in braces and training bras. It had been cute then. Now, it was downright sexy.

His brother was an idiot for letting her go.

“So why *are* you here, Ryder?” Vicky said in a hushed voice only he could hear, even as she smiled and nodded greetings to the various CEOs and socialites they passed.

“What’s the matter, princess, don’t like me cramping your style?”

The truth was he hadn’t intended to come in at all. He figured he’d cause a scene in the lobby, nab some unfavorable publicity for the fam, then go out drinking with his ladypals of the evening. Just part of his usual *screw with the folks because when you’re the black sheep, it’s what you do* routine.

He wasn’t sure why he’d come in. He suspected he might do anything Vicky wanted, if she asked firmly enough. Besides, it was fun to ruffle her feathers. She needed her feathers ruffled more.

“*Don’t* call me ‘princess,’” she warned.

Was it wrong that her sternness just made him want to mess with her more?

“Whatever you say, Vic.”

But instead of engaging further, she dropped her hand from his arm and spun to the side. “Mrs. Wu, it’s so lovely to see you!”

Ryder turned to see Vicky warmly taking the hand of a white-haired Chinese woman as she leaned in to give her an air kiss. He chuckled, shaking his head. What the hell was the point of an air kiss?

“And, Mr. Wu, how is the woodworking?”

The older man beside Mrs. Wu gave Vicky a friendly nod. “It keeps me busy, which is a good thing since I don’t think I’m ever going to convince Charlotte here to retire.”

Vicky smiled broadly. “I have to say I’m happy to hear it. The tech community would be at a tremendous loss if she did.” She took the woman’s hand again and leaned in conspiratorially. “Charlotte, I would love to sit down with you next week and talk to you about a school software project I think Wu International would be just perfect for.”

The woman beamed. “I’d be delighted to, Victoria. You know I’ve been looking for an excuse to work with you again, my dear.”

“Wonderful. Assuming Vincent doesn’t mind giving you up for a few hours.”

Vincent put on a long-suffering expression. “I learned a long time ago there’s no point resisting. I’ve got to share her with the world.” He shook his head but broke out with a smile, leaning over to plant a kiss on his wife’s temple.

It was really pretty sweet. If you were into that sort of thing.

The women made arrangements to be in touch the following week, and Ryder tipped his head to bid them adieu as Vicky took his arm again and steered him back out into the crowd.

“Thank you for not saying anything back there,” she murmured.

“You mean not saying anything to embarrass you?”

She blushed.

“Vic, I would never. Not to you.”

She shot him a skeptical eye.

“Not on purpose anyway.” That drew a half smile.

He watched her, moving swiftly through the packed ballroom. Like a shark. A gorgeous shark.

“You’re very smooth, you know,” he said.

“Don’t mock me, Ryder.”

“I’m not.” And he wasn’t either. Jesus, what *did* she think of him? He was reckless, sure. But he wasn’t a jerk. At least not to anyone who hadn’t asked for it.

She slowed to a stop, glanced down at her feet, and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. It’s not you. It’s just this isn’t so easy, doing this alone.”

“Why *are* you alone?” he asked before he could stop himself. Wrong thing to say.

She looked up at him, visibly wounded. Maybe he was a jerk.

“Forget my stupid brother,” he added. “I just mean where’s your date for this shindig? Surely you have one? I hope he’s not going to jump out from behind the refreshment table and, I don’t know, challenge me to a duel or something.”

She laughed at that. Much better. “What sort of man do you think I date, Ryder?”

The first response that popped into his head was *The sort that doesn’t deserve you*, but he wasn’t about to say that out loud. He was trying to figure out exactly what to say when she spoke again.

“My date’s not coming. He had to cancel.”

See? Doesn’t deserve her. “Well then, he’s a fool.”

“He’s a very busy, important businessman who sometimes has to sacrifice personal pleasure for professional

responsibilities. I admire that.” He was sure she did. From what he could tell, Vicky had been committed to her work beyond all else since she emerged from college a fully formed businesswoman nine years ago. He admired *that*. But he also thought it was a shame.

“Vic, you know, it’s okay to have fun just for the sake of fun sometimes.”

“You mean like bringing a selection of scantily clad groupies to a high-profile charity event, just to see what happens?”

Busted.

Ryder experienced the odd sensation of half enjoying someone like Vicky calling him on his bullshit and half hating it. He definitely wasn’t going to let her get the last word, though.

“You know, princ—”

“Ivy!!”



RYDER WAS NOT without his charms—he was incorrigible, but not without his charms. Nevertheless, Vicky was not about to let him start lecturing her about who and how to date.

Luckily, she had spotted Ivy Steadman and Alec Ames. Ivy was the woman responsible for all the PR around the Pink Heart Ball every year—a formidable job. Alec, her boyfriend, had achieved fame and fortune as a wind-power boy wonder. They were also an adorable couple and good friends of hers. Was it wrong that she was using them as a diversion? She hoped not.

“Ivy, the committee did an *amazing* job this year! Far and away the most elegant Pink Heart Ball in memory. And that’s saying something!”

The pretty auburn-haired woman grinned, leaning in to exchange air kisses with Vicky. “We considered it our duty

after the fiasco that happened last year—Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean ...”

Ivy had obviously just remembered that Valentine’s last year had been the day Noah had freaked out on Vicky when she tried to discuss marriage, fled the city, and ended up meeting the woman he was now madly in love with.

“It’s okay, Ivy, I know it’s not what you meant.”

The poor woman was still bright pink. Alec put his arm around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. “For someone whose whole job is about image and presentation, you do have a way of putting your foot in your mouth.”

Ivy gasped with feign shock and swatted him hard enough that he pulled back to rub his arm. But they were smiling at each other.

Yep. Adorable.

Vicky didn’t begrudge anyone happiness (including Noah, it should be noted). But nights like this did make it hard not to be jealous.

Ivy composed herself. “I am sorry. I just meant the storm last year.”

“I knew what you meant. And I’m sorry. That must have been exasperating.”

A blizzard had blown through the Northeast. The city had been spared the worst of it, but roads to the north had been treacherous, and attendance had been reduced to those who lived in town and a few guests who had flown in earlier in the week. (And Vicky had spent the evening at home, worried Noah had been swallowed by the storm, but that was another story.)

Alec chanced putting his arm around Ivy again. “It wasn’t great. Ivy may or may not have spent most of the day railing against the weather gods. A whole bunch of extra donations poured in the next day, so maybe it worked.”

“Yeah, or maybe your invite list is full of people whose reflex reaction to any problem is to throw money at it.”

Vicky, Ivy, and Alec all turned to look at Ryder. He shrugged, flashing her a boyish grin.

So much for him behaving himself. Was she going to have to muzzle him?

Ivy, who had been staring at him for the last few seconds finally burst out. “Ryder? Ryder Prince, is that you?”

“In the flesh.” He wagged his brows. “But I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

Vicky had simultaneous urges to roll her eyes and to laugh. She did neither.

“Oh, Ivy Steadman. Pleased to meet you.” She shook his hand. “And do you know my boyfriend, Alec?”

Ryder nodded to Alec. Vicky doubted the men had met in person. Ryder traveled in very different circles than the clean-cut, upstanding Ames. But it wasn’t like there were *that* many young billionaires in New York (even those who were only billionaires by trust fund like Ryder), so of course, they were familiar with each other.

“Oh wow,” Ivy continued. “I’m sorry, Ryder. I didn’t recognize you at first!”

He chuckled at that. “Was it the suit, the setting, or the company?”

He looked over at Vicky and winked.

Ivy knit her brows together and looked back and forth between them.

“So ... wait ... Are you two here together?!” She gasped. “Oh, Vicky, I’m so happy for you. I know it’s been a heck of a year ...”

Oh dear. How was she going to break this to Ivy without embarrassing her further?

“You two make the cutest couple!!”

Ryder leaned over to Vicky, and asked in a stage whisper, “Do you want to tell her, or should I?”

Ivy looked at her, looking slightly nervous. “Tell me what?”

“Well, um ...”

“Oh, no. You’re not together, are you?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Ivy buried her face in her hands. “I am so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.”

Alec squeezed her gently against his side. “It might be all the sleep deprivation working around the clock promoting the event.”

Ivy nodded. “You may be onto something there. Buy me a cappuccino at the dessert bar? Before I humiliate myself further?”

Alec chuckled. “Sure thing, sweetie. Nice to see you both.”

He and Ivy nodded their farewells before making a beeline for the refreshment tables.

“Well, that was fun,” said Ryder, grinning beside her.

This time Vicky did smack him, right in the gut. He let out a little grunt, but his amusement didn’t falter.

She turned to him. “Did you have to do that?”

“Do what, exactly?”

Well, it was true he hadn’t really done anything other than tell the truth. But he *had* enjoyed it a little too much.

“I don’t know. Find entertainment in others’ embarrassment, I guess.”

“Please, she’s fine. Unless you wanted me to tell her we were together?”

His voice was low and husky, his eyes locked on hers, twinkling with humor and mischief.

Vicky’s stomach dropped of its own accord, and she felt her cheeks heat. But she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes from him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Well, well, well. Now *this* was interesting. The mere suggestion of some sort of romantic entanglement with him and Vicky Ashby had turned the color of a ripe berry. He wouldn't have thought she'd be susceptible. And he had forgotten how truly delicious she was to mess with. Or maybe it was just more fun now that his Boy Scout little brother wasn't around.

He opened his mouth to tease her about the blush when a voice sang out behind her.

“Oh, Vicky, there you are! I wasn't sure if you were here, y—”

He pasted on a placid smile. “Hello, Mother.”

“Ryder! I didn't expect to see you here!”

“Didn't you? You put my name on the invitation list.”

He liked to pester his mom, too, but there was nothing playful about it. Just the bitter taste in his mouth that was always there whenever his family was concerned.

“Well, of course, dear, but I do that every year. You know, ever hopeful. But you've never used the invitation.”

“Surprise.” He framed his face in jazz hands, underscoring their irony with his blank expression.

“Where've you gone to, Cheryl? I had to chase you halfway across the ballroom—oh. Hello, son.” His dad did little to hide his distaste, a grimace spreading across his jowls.

“Oh, good,” Ryder said, “the gang’s all here.”

His mother gave a noncommittal hum and smoothed a hand over her already-smooth silver bob.

Vic cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Are the two of you enjoying the evening? The musicians are truly wonderful this year, aren’t they?”

Good ol’ Warren let out a sort of a snort and downed the drink he had in his hand. Cheryl smiled benevolently at Vicky. He knew his mom loved Vicky like a daughter. Too bad she didn’t quite love him like a son. At least not the son she wanted.

“It is lovely, isn’t it, Vicky?” the older woman said.

Then a funny look crossed her face. She glanced back at Ryder. Then again at Vicky. Then Ryder. Then Vic.

“So—I’m sorry—did you two come here—”

Vic bubbled over with effusive laughter. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! We didn’t ... We’re not ... What I mean is—”

“We’re not here together is what I think she’s trying to tell you.”

His mother laughed. She swatted the air. “Oh. No. Of course not. You wouldn’t be. What a ridiculous thought!”

Right. Of course. The idea of anyone like Victoria Ashby so much as agreeing to an evening with the likes of him was outrageous.

“I need a drink,” he said. As luck would have it, a waiter was just passing them with a tray of full glasses. It was Chablis, not Scotch, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

He grabbed one and downed it.

His father glared at him. “Watch your drinking here, son. This isn’t a rager in the Hollywood Hills where getting arrested is *de rigueur*.”

There were a lot of things Ryder could have said in response. He could, for instance, point out that the night being referenced, blown out of proportion by the tabloids, had in fact

only involved a neighbor complaining about the noise, and no one had been arrested. Or he could remind Warren that he himself was the Prince who could least hold his liqueur, typically falling asleep after only a drink or two.

But after a moment's consideration, Ryder decided the best course of action was to grab a glass of Burgundy from the next passing server and down that as well.

Warren shook his head. "I told you not to invite him, Cheryl. The boy can't be controlled."

That did it. "Maybe," he spat, "that's because I'm a grown man."

Warren just looked him up and down before letting out a half snort.

"Warren ...," his mom scolded gently, but he knew that was all she would do.

Ryder drew a breath, ready to dress down his arrogant, dismissive, self-centered jerk of a—

"Ryder." Vicky laid her hand on his arm. Her touch was warm and solid through his sleeve. It was weirdly grounding and disorienting, all at the same time. "I'd love to dance. Would you mind?"

He looked over at her and was lost in her eyes for a moment. There was so much there in the rich, glinting amber. No malice, but a firmness. And grown man or not, he found that he couldn't say no to her.



VICKY LED Ryder out to the center of the dance floor, as far as she could get him from his parents without making it obvious that that was what she was doing. The Princes had always been lovely to her, particularly Cheryl, but she knew their relationship with Ryder had been rocky for years.

She turned to face him, placing her hand on his shoulder. He took her other hand in his and pulled her in, positioning

them for the waltz that was playing. He held her a little closer than was customary, but it was his eyes, nearly ebony and locked on hers, that made their stance feel intimate.

“I should thank you for rescuing me.”

She sighed. “They’re not *so* bad, you know.” She couldn’t help but feel that if he’d let them in a little, the relationship might offer him some of the warmth his life seemed to lack.

“Oh, no, they’re not bad at all to *you*, princess. But then, you’re not the devil, are you?”

She blinked back at him. He was so dark and bitter, hardened against the world the rest of his family lived in. And in that instant, she wondered if he did it by choice or because he felt he had no choice.

“Well, you aren’t eithe—”

“Less talk, more dance.” He grinned, whirling her around the floor so that her breath and her feet needed a few seconds to catch up, and she lost the thought entirely.

After a moment, though, she found her stride and felt almost giddy. Ryder was an amazing dancer. She had nearly forgotten.

“We haven’t danced like this in a long time, have we?” he said, as if reading her mind.

“No.”

Not in a very long time.

She doubted he remembered, but they had, in fact, only danced together one other time. It was summer, years ago. She was still in high school. Ryder was just about to drop out of college, not that she had known that, of course. Their families were at their summer homes, and they had both been dragged to some boring anniversary party or something (though how the Princes had managed to drag Ryder anywhere, even at that young age, she didn’t know.)

She and Noah had been good friends ever since their families had met, when they were both in seventh grade. But

he was still away at boarding school then, due back that weekend.

So it was Ryder, the older, more mysterious Prince boy, who had asked her to dance. She had accepted, considering her other option was to sit on the sidelines and be bored out of her mind. And maybe, just maybe, she had been a little curious about Noah's rebellious older brother.

She'd been shocked, she remembered, to discover he was an expert ballroom dancer. His mother, he explained with just a hint of contempt, had insisted. That made sense.

But she knew the magnetic, dangerous look in his eye had nothing to do with his mother. And when they were tired of dancing on the night, and he suggested they sneak off to take a walk on the beach, she'd been too curious to say no. Nothing had happened in the end, of course. At least nothing significant enough to keep her and Noah from becoming ... her and Noah after that. But she'd be lying if she said she didn't understand Ryder's appeal.

"Whatcha thinkin' about, princess?" present-day Ryder said with a smirk, spinning her effortlessly through the sea of dancing couples.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I thought I told you to stop calling me that."

"Yes, I believe you did." He leaned in close, and whispered in her ear, "Princess."

She wanted to be mad, but it was nearly impossible. He was relentless but also oddly endearing, and being so close to him, gliding across the floor ... Well, the whole thing was a tiny bit intoxicating. So she settled for hiding her face in his shoulder as she suppressed a giggle.

He was warm and solid, and she lost herself in the music and the moment for a few seconds as a sort of longing washed over her. Not for Ryder, of course, but for this. For closeness. She knew now that she and Noah had never been right for each other, she did. But she was used to him. Used to having

someone who was hers. And heaven help her, she missed him right now.

And then his stupid older brother opened his stupid mouth and ruined it. “So what gives with Noah anyway? I thought Prince Charming *had* to show at the ball.”

Right. She was dancing with Ryder. Right. And she had Davis anyway. And she was here to represent the foundation and had absolutely no business getting all sappy and sentimental.

She pulled herself up straighter, putting some distance between them. “I’m not sure. He wanted to take some time with Sabrina. And since I was planning to attend anyway, I told him I’d be happy to handle the networking.”

He scoffed. “What a jackass.”

Vicky stiffened. “I am perfectly capable of managing that task on my own.”

“Of course you are, but he’s still a jackass.”

She was about to argue when she realized that (a) though her feelings were more complex on the matter, she didn’t *entirely* disagree with his assessment—she really would rather have had Noah there to show solidarity for the business, given this was the first Pink Heart Ball since their breakup. And (b) she wasn’t going to knock this particular chip off Ryder’s shoulder just by telling him it didn’t belong there.

“Let’s talk about something else,” she said instead.

“Good idea! Let’s talk about your date ghosting you. Do I have to beat someone up?”

Vicky gritted her teeth. “No, Ryder, you don’t need to beat anyone up. Davis simply had a business commitment he couldn’t avoid.”

“Davis? Davis King? The Kingdom guy? Sunshine Kingdom, Peachtree Kingdom, *Monsoon* Kingdom?”

He was definitely getting less endearing.

“There is no Monsoon Kingdom, and you know it. And, yes, the Kingdom guy, among other things. Davis is a very astute businessman. The King theme parks along with the movie studios and television network and all the other subsidiaries are a trillion-dollar enterprise.”

“That he inherited from his grandfather.”

“That has earned him international accolades as a shrewd and innovative leader.”

“Sure, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

The song came to an end, and Vicky stared daggers at him. He responded by chuckling in amusement, then dropping her hands to grab another glass of wine from a passing tray.

She just stared at him.

“Oh, sorry. Did you want one?”

Another song started up, but they just stood in the middle of the floor. A few people were starting to look at them.

He took a swig. “You kinda got a theme going, huh?” She folded her arms and arched a brow. “You know, Prince, King ... Got a fake royalty fetish there, *princ*—”

“Don’t.”

He grinned, then turned to the nearest server—who was a good twenty feet away—and yelled, “Oh, garçon? Two more, please!”

Now everyone was looking at them. Vicky could hear the whispers.

“Is that *Ryder Prince*?”

“Who let him in?”

“Is he here with Victoria Ashby?”

The waiter arrived, looking obviously self-conscious. “Sir?”

But as Ryder grabbed two glasses of wine, Vicky swooped in and took them away, depositing them back on the tray.

“Thank you,” she said to the waiter, nodding for him to leave. He scurried away.

“Really, Vic”—he leaned in close again, his breath tickling her ear—“I’ve always liked you. But you have terrible taste in men.”

Okay. Enough was enough. “All right, Ryder. I think it’s time to go.” She hooked her arm through his and spun him toward the exit. The crowd parted for them, whispering frantically as they passed.

Ryder, of course, just chuckled, but at least he walked with her. “I agree. This place is full of stuffed shirts. And whatever the ladies here have been stuffing.”

He leered at a woman as they passed. Vicky seethed but said nothing.

“So whaddaya think, Vic? Where should we go?”

“*You* are going home.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. That sounds boring. Let’s go clubbing. Have you ever actually been clubbing? You’d be fantastic at it.”

They reached the lobby. She yanked him aside, studying him for a moment to assess him. He wasn’t drunk (a guy like Ryder would need a heck of a lot more than a couple of glasses of wine for that). No, he was just being his usual impulsive and impertinent self. He’d be fine if she stuck him in a cab and sent him home.

She turned and scanned the lobby for the kid who had been there earlier. He was still stationed at the door. Good. She caught his eye and motioned for him to come over.

As he did, she turned to Ryder, and said, “Now you be quiet.”

She thought he might put up a fight, but instead, he just said, “Yes, ma’am.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Ryder wasn't really sure why he let Vicky drag him out of the ball. Well, that wasn't true. As fun as it had been to crash the thing, it wasn't all that much fun to stay there.

But now she had pulled that scrawny kid aside—the one who had tried to throw him out earlier. She hadn't let go of Ryder—as if somehow her slender arm, toned though it was, would be enough to keep him there by brute force if necessary. He stayed put, though. She felt sort of nice pressed up against his side like this, and besides, watching her try to wrangle him in was sort of entertaining.

He waited patiently as she whispered to the hotel kid something about getting Ryder a cab and sending him on his way. Discreetly, of course, by way of the alley along the side of the hotel.

Because of course the press out front would be way too interested in him. The joke was on her because they'd already gotten plenty of shots of him arriving with his lady companions earlier in the evening. But here was Vic, trying to run damage control anyway. Trying to keep things as neat and nice as possible.

She was probably afraid he'd cause a big scene on the way out. He ought to too. She was only doing this to protect his parents from the sheer embarrassment of the gossip papers reminding everyone that he was their son. Screw that. What he should do was make a huge scene, just to stick it to them.

And yet, somehow, he couldn't bring himself to. To his parents, he was an eternal disappointment. But for all her allegiance to them and his do-no-wrong brother, Vic was different. Yes, she was impatient with him. But now as always, she was treating him like he wasn't the scourge of the earth. And some part of him didn't want to disappoint her.

He really had always liked her. There was something about her. So strong and determined. Though holy hell did she need to loosen up.

"Thank you very much," she was saying to the kid, who scurried down a hallway toward the side exit.

She turned back to Ryder, leveling her gaze at him. "So, are you going to go willingly, or do I have to call in reinforcements?"

He wondered what "reinforcements" would entail. A collection of octogenarians in formal attire? A band of chambermaids? But he could see that challenging her on this would only cause her stress at this point, and even if she wasn't saying so, it was obvious she wasn't having the easiest of evenings (even without a disruptive hooligan such as himself to contend with).

"For you, Vic, I'll go willingly."

He flashed her his trademark cockeyed smile, the one that usually charmed men and women alike into letting him get away with murder. Or at least behavior that was worthy of gossip headlines. But she just sighed and shook her head.

"Come on, Ryder."

She pulled him down the hallway after the kid, who was now standing at a nondescript side exit, holding the door. Ryder eyed him as they walked through, and the kid immediately cast his gaze at the floor.

"Good night, sir," he stammered.

Ryder let out a little growl at the kid. He couldn't help himself. He chuckled as he and Vicky passed into the darkened alley where a cab was already waiting.

“You’re a menace,” she said. She definitely didn’t approve, but she didn’t seem angry either. Just resigned to him being him.

“I just like to have fun.”

“I like to have fun too. Enough that I know amusing yourself by upsetting others isn’t the best way to do it.”

She opened the cab door, gesturing for him to get inside. In the front seat, the driver seemed to be deeply engrossed in a text conversation on his phone, paying them no attention.

He couldn’t resist. He stepped closer to her, closer than they’d been when they were dancing. Close enough to feel the heat rising off her. He leaned down, and said in a low, husky voice, “Well, if that’s not it, Vic, what is it? What’s the best way to have fun?”

She stared up at him, momentarily flustered. Which was what he’d intended. It was *all* he’d intended.

Except she was so close, searching his eyes. *Not*, he noted vaguely, coming back with a retort or pushing him away. And man, oh man, she really did need to loosen up.

So he did the natural thing. He leaned forward and kissed her senseless.



IT TOOK Vicky a second to recognize what was happening. Ryder was kissing her. *Kissing* her.

And, it seemed, *she* was kissing *him*.

Her lips parted, and she altered the angle of her mouth against his, reaching up to run her hands through his tousled mix of dark waves—a move that felt even better than she’d imagined it. Not that she’d spent time imagining it.

Why was she kissing him again? He moved his hands to the small of her back and pulled her tighter against him. Well, for one thing because he was damn good at it.

Which only stood to reason really. Because obviously you didn't get a reputation like his by not being good at things like kissing. In dark alleys.

Oh good God, she was kissing Ryder Prince in a dark alley! She couldn't do that!

She placed her hand on his very, very well-defined chest and pushed him back. His eyes searched hers, like maybe he was just as confused by what just happened as she was. Was that possible?

Then came that cocky grin. Nope. Not possible.

"Well, well, princess. Maybe you do know how to have fun."

Then he leaned in again as if he was coming back for more.

For a split second, her mixed-up body screamed yes. But fortunately, her mouth gave him a firm "No."

"No?" he asked, looking vaguely disappointed.

"No, Ryder. I'm not going to make out with you in the shadows beside the hotel dumpsters."

He opened his mouth.

"Or anywhere else!" she added.

He shrugged. "Yeah. Okay. You're a good kid, you know that, princess?"

He reached out and chucked her under the chin, then climbed into the car. But he leaned out again before closing the door.

"It's really too bad."

Then he flashed that infuriating grin again, shut the door, and tapped the driver. Vicky stood there, watching the cab pull away.

What. The hell. Was that?

What was with him kissing her? *What* was with her kissing him back? She had a boyfriend. Or at least a prime candidate

poised to become her boyfriend. And even if she hadn't, the last person in the world she'd want to be caught kis—

A sudden shiver ran down her spine. But when she turned to look up the alley, it was empty. And when she looked back at the door into the hotel, she could see the kid had propped the door with one of those plastic wedges and left. They'd been alone. Thank goodness.

She could only imagine what kind of trouble it might cause if anyone had witnessed that kiss.

NEW YORK MINUTE

Hold the presses—we mean hooooold the presses! And while you're at it, you might as well SHUT THE FRONT DOOR. Because if you thought this year's Pink Heart Ball was going to be just another snoozefest like all the others ... Well, no judgment, because we thought that too. But whoa Nelly were we wrong!

Not ONLY was Noah Prince, a.k.a. Prince Charming, MIA this year for the first time in, like, EVER (last year doesn't count because he was stranded in a *blizzard*, people), but RYDER Prince actually showed up! He arrived with a small entourage of ladies, but his friends were turned away at the door, presumably either for not having invites or for not being properly attired. (Or maybe for not being snooty enough? Who knows?)

Anyway, don't despair for Ryder because he spent the evening with one Victoria Ashby—yes, his little bro's ex—at his side. Several attendees reported seeing them getting very cozy on the dance floor.

BUT EVEN THIS ISN'T THE BIG DISH OF THE NIGHT.

Because, ladies and gentlemen, it seems that Ms. Ashby and Mr. *Ryder* Prince snuck out the back door in the middle of the event. AND were seen in one heck of a lip-lock moments later, as evidenced in this photo obtained by NY Minute, below.

(Go 'head and take a few minutes to let that sink in. We're still working on it.)

CHAPTER SIX

Ryder was woken from a very pleasant sleep by the very unpleasant sound of someone pounding on his apartment door. He ignored it for a few minutes, but when it showed no sign of stopping, he pulled himself out of bed and shuffled bleary-eyed to answer. How, he wondered groggily, had anyone made it past the doorman? He swung the door open and found himself face-to-face with one very irate-looking Victoria Ashby. Ah. That tracked. He wouldn't have wanted to get in her way either.

“Morning, princess. What brings you here?”

Rather than answer, Vic turned bright pink and hastily lowered her eyes. Ryder glanced down at himself, taking in his bare tattooed chest and low-slung pajama bottoms. Ah. The corner of his mouth curled up. Christ, she was cute when she was embarrassed.

Vicky kept her eyes averted, but she pushed past Ryder into his living room. Okay, then.

He shut the door and followed her into the room where she was already pacing. Aggressively.

Whatever this was, it was too early for it. There didn't seem to be any way for him to get out of it, though, so he tried the direct approach. “Help you with something, darlin'?”

“Oh that's rich, that's really rich. You couldn't have thought of that last night before you kissed me?”

Oh, yes. The kiss. That *had* been one of his better ideas. Very enjoyable, and he was pretty sure she'd been enjoying

herself, too, before she put an end to it. But his plan to loosen her up had clearly failed.

She spun to look at him. “Well?! Do you have nothing to say for yourself?!”

Failed spectacularly.

She put her hands on her hips and let out an exasperated sigh. “And could you *please* put a shirt on?”

“Okay, okay.” He grinned, shaking his head as he walked into the bedroom and grabbed a T-shirt. He pulled it over his head as he returned to the next room. “Keep your pants on.”

Vicky, finally able to look him in the eye, had not an ounce of amusement on her face. “I’m glad you think this is so funny.”

“You showing up at my place at the crack of dawn, all mad about ... whatever you’re mad about? Yeah, I think it’s kinda funny.”

“It’s ten thirty, and have you really not seen it?”

“Until about three minutes ago, I hadn’t seen anything but the insides of my eyelids in hours.”

Vicky groaned. She pulled her phone out of her handbag, tapped at the screen for a minute, then handed it to him.

It was a gossip column, featuring a brief recounting of his evening. Something he was more than used to. He’d be shocked if they *didn’t* write about him.

And there was a photo. Also not surprising. People snuck snapshots of him and sold them to the press all the time. Particularly if they managed to catch him doing something racy or scandalous, which he definitely was here.

There was one thing slightly different about this photo, though. He looked up at Vicky, who was giving him a now-do-you-get-it look. Of course. He should have known.

“Nice angle. Makes it look even hotter than it was.”

“I don’t think you appreciate the position this puts me in.”

He looked back at the photo. “Oh, I appreciate it all right.”

She snatched her phone from him. “Ryder, I’m serious. This might be the norm for you, but there are implications for me. Today’s headline was supposed to be ‘Vicky Ashby Makes Grand Return to Society with Respected Entertainment Mogul,’ *not* ‘Vicky Ashby Slinks into Alley with Ex’s Sexpot Brother.’”

Ryder burst out laughing. “Okay, first of all, I’m pretty sure that term is meant for women—”

“You know what I mean.” She waved him away.

“And second on all”—he leaned in close—“you think I’m a sexpot?”

She glared at him. Man, she had a serious glare.

“Fo-cus,” she hissed.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for ... what happened last night to be photographed. What’s the issue? Is Mr. Respected Entertainment Mogul upset?”

“No.” She sank down onto the sofa. “I haven’t even spoken to him yet.”

Oh?

“You came to see me first, eh?” He arched a brow.

Aaand there was that glare again. “He lives on the West Coast, remember? It’s early there.”

Ryder stepped behind the kitchen counter, which looked out onto the living room. His New York place was a luxury apartment, but it was compact. He preferred it that way. Besides, he had places around the globe and didn’t spend all that much time there. New York might be a huge city, but it was also where his family lived, and that tended to get oppressive fast.

He pulled a bag of coffee beans from the freezer and dumped some into the grinder.

“All right, well, if it’s not him, then what’s the problem?”

She turned and stared at him. “*What’s the problem?*”

He held the button down, momentarily punctuating the conversation with the electrical whirring sound.

“Yeah. What’s the problem? I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Look, I know you might be used to this kind of press, but I’m not. And it’s not the kind of exposure I want.”

His stomach suddenly turned sour.

“Yeah, it must be awful to be associated with the likes of me,” he muttered.

She looked up at him, startled. “That’s not what I meant.”

One look in her eyes made it obvious she was sincere. If he’d thought about it, he would have known it wasn’t what she meant. He wasn’t used to dealing with people like Vic, though. He was used to his family. She was too good for the lot of them.

“Yeah. Okay.” He looked at her again, all put together and prim. He knew what she meant. She had built a reputation for herself, respectable, impeccable. One she’d used to get where she was, co-running one of the most successful charitable foundations in the world. One she relied on to reach her goals and keep her in the game. Sexy photos with him did not help forward that cause.

He knew without bothering to look that the piece would have been picked up by hundreds of other sites by now. They were most likely trending on Twitter. It would be a mess.

“Okay,” he said, dumping the grounds into the filter on the coffee maker. “Okay, well, we’ll fix it, then.”

“Oh, we’ll just ‘fix it,’ will we? With a photo like that?”

“I’ve had worse, believe m—”

“And all the people who saw us at the ball? Your own parents thought we were there together.”

“Oh, no. No, no. That I remember clearly. They thought the idea of us being together was ridiculous.”

She stood now, coming to lean on the breakfast bar. “But they considered it. That’s my point. We *looked* like we were there together. We *danced* like we were a couple. And then out in the alley, we ...”

“Did couple things?” He raised a brow.

“Yes. Which are now on display for the world to see.” She spoke matter-of-factly, but she turned her face away, clearly blushing. It was kind of adorable.

“So people think we’re a couple, and we don’t want them to. We’ll just tell them it isn’t true.”

“If we deny it, it will just feed the rumor mill.”

“Fine, then I’ll just go out and pick up a biker chick or something and make sure I get photographed with her. You go back to your wholesome boy toy, and this whole nonstory will be forgotten.”

“Absolutely not.”

Ryder fought the urge to sigh. Okay, he may have sighed a little. But not nearly as big as he wanted to. “No?” he asked as patiently as he could, considering he’d just woken up, and Vic was talking in circles about things he really didn’t care about.

“No.” She strode around the breakfast bar, her heels clicking on the kitchen tile, and nudged him to the side. “If we announce there’s nothing going on, it’ll look like we had some kind of tawdry fling and are trying to cover it up.” She briskly ran water into the carafe and finished making the coffee he’d abandoned as she spoke. “And if you try to deflect by being seen with another woman, I’ll be the fling you threw over for ‘some biker chick or something.’ And you being who you are and me being who I am ... well, there’d be a *huge* scandal, and the last thing we need is a scandal.”

He blinked at her. “I don’t really mind a scandal so much.”

She spun to look at him, leaning her back against the counter. “Well, I do. Please, Ryder. I’ve had a hell of a year. I’m trying to turn that around. This is about my career. I’m trying to build respect. Credibility. Make a path for myself, in

my own right, where I can really make a difference. I don't need to be one of your conquests."

She had a point.

And she had had a hell of a year. And what she didn't say was that she also didn't need to be the woman tossed aside by *two* Prince men in one year.

Even without trying, Ryder had seen more than his share of articles about poor Vicky Ashby and how she'd shrunk from society. While Noah was portrayed—as ever—as the golden boy, this time with a new girlfriend on his arm. There was probably little that could have been done to avoid that kind of spin. Vic was, after all, the less famous half of the Noah/Vic duo. The media was bound to gush over his happiness, which left her in the role of the lonely ex.

Ryder was used to negative press. Hell, he thrived on it. But he knew there was no way Vic had been enjoying it. And he didn't like the idea of him adding to that.

He ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah, okay. I get it. You don't want more attention."

"Exactly. And it's not just me. Your parents would—"

Nope. Not going there.

"I don't care about my parents."

"Well, I do. They still sign my paychecks, not to mention controlling the funds the foundation operates on. And aside from all that, they've always been kind to me."

Too bad they hadn't afforded the same affection to their actual offspring, he thought bitterly. But then Vicky added, "Especially since my mom died."

Muscle tension he hadn't noticed he'd been building melted away, and he slumped against the counter. He didn't want to talk about his parents. He didn't want to *think* about his parents. And when he did, he was most definitely not inclined to think generously toward them. But even from his by then comfortable distance from his family, he had seen what had happened when Vic lost her mother sophomore year

of college. She had been devastated, and his parents—his mom, in particular, who had been Carmen Ashby’s best friend—had all but adopted her.

He looked up into her eyes. She stared back at him, hard and determined but with a soft sort of pleading just visible underneath the surface. It couldn’t hurt to hear her out, right?

“Okay. Fine. Let me hear the plan.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oh, thank goodness. Because, of course, Vicky had a plan.

What she hadn't been certain of was if she'd be able to get Ryder to listen to it.

She'd been poised and determined on her way over, though she'd known from the outset Ryder wasn't the easiest person to convince to do *anything*.

But what had really thrown her was him opening the door as if he had just stumbled out of bed. Or a *GQ* photoshoot. Or, most accurately, a *GQ* photoshoot featuring him stumbling out of bed.

For goodness' sake—guys like Ryder should not be allowed to just answer their doors shirtless like that. And women like her definitely didn't need to see that when they were already dealing with a media fiasco.

And the tattoo!

She'd forgotten all about the tattoo.

She'd seen it before, obviously. Everybody had seen it before, in countless photos of Ryder at the beach shirtless, Ryder on a yacht shirtless, Ryder greasy and smudged and tinkering with one of his cars or motorcycles or what have you—shirtless. Because why not? The paparazzi seemingly loved nothing better than a good shot of Ryder's chest.

But now that she thought about it, Vicky *hadn't* seen it up close and personal like this. The tattoo, not Ryder's chest.

Well, either.

From here, you could see the fine detail on the huge winged dragon that spanned his torso and curled down his right arm, the tail coming to a delicate point around his wrist. Face to, er, pecs like that, she could see every delicate line.

It was a gorgeous design. One, she now registered, that had to be Ryder's own work. Up close, the style was unmistakable, at least for the privileged few who had seen his art before—which she had.

Though never, *never* quite like this.

Scales blending with the sprinkling of dark hair, sinews of mythical beast swirling into the lines of muscle on the man.

The entire thing was, let's just say, distracting.

But now he was (more or less) dressed and (more or less) listening. So she laid it out for him.

“We will have a short, civilized relationship, and then in a few weeks, we'll cite incompatibilities and go our separate ways. It's not ideal, and I'm not sure how much the public will like the idea of you and me dating, but under the circumstances, it's our best option for damage control. At the very least, it will simply look like an ill-advised romance rather than some sort of sordid fling.”

Ryder blinked at her. Then he burst out laughing. “Oh, I see, so you want to have some kind of fake relationship, you and me?”

She nodded. “Exactly.”

“Yeah, I don't think so.”

“You don't *think* so?”

He folded his arms. “Does this ‘short, civilized relationship’ involve making civilized appearances all along the social circuit with you?”

Well, obviously.

“Yes,” she said as patiently as she could. “Since the whole idea will be to show off our non-scandalous relationship, we'll

need to be seen and photographed doing non-scandalous things.”

“I like you, Vic, but I’m not going to go around eating tea and crumpets for a month just to make a nothing story go away. I wasn’t even planning on staying in New York past the weekend.”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you put your mouth on mine.”

“Oh, you loved that,” he said with his usual smug cockiness.

Trouble was, he wasn’t wrong. But she wasn’t about to let him know that. And it was entirely beside the point anyway.

Attracted or otherwise, they certainly didn’t belong together. Not for the obvious surface reasons, which were at the root of the current PR problem. But because they were too mismatched. Ryder would be bored to tears with someone like her. And she would do best with someone staid and traditional, like Davis.

Random, biochemical attraction, or whatever was going on with her, was irrelevant.

But that PR problem? That needed to be addressed.

She opened her mouth to respond. There was a knock on the door. She frowned.

“I don’t know if you’re expecting someone, but we really need to sort this out.”

He smirked as he walked to the door. “Believe me, no one I’d be expecting would dare show up here before noon.”

She’d been dressed and showered at 7:00 and *could* have shown up then, which she was about to tell him when a familiar voice called through the door.

“Ryder, it’s us. Mom and Dad. That nice doorman let us up.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as if trying to contain his irritation. He didn’t look like he had much success.

He flung open the door.

There stood Cheryl and Warren. Vicky was quite fond of them, of course. But this wasn't exactly the best timing.

"Oh, good," said Cheryl, looking Ryder up and down. "We weren't sure you'd be up."

"I wouldn't have been if it weren't for—"

"Victoria!"

Cheryl stopped short upon spotting her. Cheryl looked back and forth between Vicky and Ryder. A look of confusion spreading across her face, mixed with a little hurt.

"So it *is* true, then?" she asked. "Why did you lie to us yesterday?"

Apparently, the Princes had seen the photo. She'd known they would eventually. She'd just hoped she and Ryder could have gotten their plan straight first. Well, it couldn't be helped. She supposed they could just bring them into the discussion.

"The boy hasn't exactly made a habit of being forthcoming with us, now has he, darling?"

Ryder clenched his jaw so hard she thought he might break a tooth.

On the other hand, it might just be simplest to keep the lie between the two of them ...

Cheryl reached out, putting her hand on Vicky's. "Are you happy together, sweetheart? That's all we care about."

Oh. "Well, I—"

Cheryl's bag suddenly burst out playing a tune.

"Oh dear. Hang on." She pulled out her phone and looked at it. "Oh! It's Noah!"

She tapped the screen and put the phone to her ear. "Noah! Honey! Why are you calling? I thought you were away for the weekend."

Ryder squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Poor Ryder. This was not exactly the morning he'd been planning, she was sure.

"No, your father's here. But I shouldn't stay on the phone too long." She whispered, as if somehow they wouldn't hear, "We're at Ryder's."

Vicky caught his eye and mouthed, *I'm sorry*. That brought the corner of his mouth up the tiniest bit. Which made her insides warm the tiniest bit. Huh. Not that it mattered because —

Cheryl let out a sound somewhere between a squeal and a shriek. "You're what? She did! Oh my goodness, wait till I tell everyone!"

A sudden, sinking feeling swept over Vicky. Tell them what?

"Okay, Noah, honey. Yes, I've got it. Oh, I'm so excited! Okay, sweetheart, I'll see you when you get back. Give my love to Sabrina."

She hung up, then turned to them, grinning. "Noah is engaged!"

She had already half guessed, and yet it hit her like a punch to the gut. She forced a smile, but a moment later, Warren cleared his throat and nodded in her direction. Cheryl blanched.

"Oh, Vicky, I'm sorry, sweetheart!"

"No. No! It's fine. I'm happy for them. Really. I'm so glad he's found someone to share his life with."

And she was. She just wished he hadn't done it while she was still struggling to even get to a real first date.



RYDER COULD NOT HAVE CARED LESS about Noah and his matrimonial plans, and he would have said so had he not been more preoccupied with getting his parents out of his apartment

and convincing Vic once and for all that he was not going to participate in this ridiculous fake romance scheme of hers.

Not that it mattered anyway since his mother was still gushing. “Isn’t it wonderful? Everyone’s coupled up!”

She beamed at him and Vic. He felt his hands ball into tight fists at his sides.

“Listen, Mom—”

Beside him, a small, strangled sound escaped Vicky’s lips. Almost inaudible, but he was close enough he caught it. His folks didn’t seem to have noticed. He glanced over at Vic, and he saw it. The tiniest flicker of distress in her eyes.

He didn’t know exactly what it meant or where it came from, but he was absolutely sure it was Noah’s fault. A protective resolve washed over him. He was *not* going to let “Prince Charming” do ... whatever this was to Vic.

“What is it, Ryder?” his mother asked.

Beside her, his father gave a long-suffering sigh, clearly directed at him. He ignored it and threw his arm around Vicky’s shoulders.

She jumped, just a little. He pulled her snug against his side.

“Nothing, just wanted to agree. Nice we’re all ‘coupled up.’”

“Aww,” Cheryl said. “Isn’t that sweet, Warren?”

Ryder noted bitterly that his mom’s usual critique of his every lifestyle choice seemed to be absent now that she thought his lifestyle included someone like Vicky.

His dad merely grunted in response. He didn’t know which was worse, the conditional approval or the unconditional disapproval.

But just then, Vic said, “It is nice, isn’t it?”

She turned to him and planted the gentlest of kisses on his cheek, and he knew he had done the right thing.

Though what he had just gotten himself into, he didn't want to begin to think about.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Vicky got home, she was shaken. So much had happened in the past twenty-four hours. Ryder had kissed her ... They had been photographed ... Noah was engaged! Then they had agreed to pretend to be involved but *not* tell any of his family what was really going on. And that wasn't even including Davis canceling on—

Davis!

She hadn't called before she'd rushed off to Ryder's because it had still been early on the West Coast—and at the time, getting to Ryder to get their story straight had been the most pressing issue.

But that was several hours ago already, and if Davis had seen the photo—

She'd better call him right away!

She dialed anxiously, trying to figure out exactly how she was going to explain all this. It rang several times, and she started to think it would go to voicemail. But just as she was mentally composing her message—*Hi, Davis, you're probably wondering why there's a picture of me in a lip-lock with another man*—he picked up.

“Victoria! Hello! Lovely to hear from you!”

There was a bustle of background noise, as if he were on a crowded street or maybe in an—

“I can't talk long,” he said, “I'm about to get on the plane.”

—airport. Oh.

“Sure, yes. Sorry to interrupt, I wanted to check in. I thought you might ... have some questions for me.”

Her stomach clenched, although she now registered that he hadn't mentioned the photo right off. So maybe he hadn't seen it, which would at least give her the opportunity to explain first—

“Ashkurak,” Davis said, presumably to someone else.

Vicky switched to speaker phone as she navigated to the map section of his contact page. “I'm sorry, which airport did you say you were in?”

Dubai, the location feature told her at the same time as he said it. “Sorry I didn't mention it. It was an unexpected emergency with the new Cinema Megapalace here.”

The flight would have taken hours. And he was *leaving* now, his business already done? He had to have boarded his private jet for the trip not all that long after he'd spoken to her yesterday. He had stood her up and then flown halfway around the world just a short while later?

She didn't know why she was surprised. She knew he was a very busy man. She *liked* that he was so hands-on and serious about his work.

So why did she feel just a tiny bit slighted by Davis's sudden trip?

She shook off the thought. Clearly just stress from everything that had happened in the past day. In fact, it was a good thing he hadn't come to the Pink Heart Ball if he was just going to get called away.

“Victoria, I'm so sorry, but I've got to go.”

“Oh, yes, sure. You're heading back to California now?”

“I'm afraid not,” he said apologetically. “Just makes sense to stop in at the Munich offices on the way. Shouldn't be there more than a few days.”

“Oh. All right, then. Safe flight.”

“You too,” he said absently as he disconnected. She gave a sort of half laugh, alone in her apartment. She wondered if he’d even noticed his mistake.

The conversation left her feeling vaguely disoriented. This was good, though, right? He had said nothing about Ryder or the photo. He would have mentioned it if he’d seen it. And given what he’d been up to and where, it seemed unlikely he’d have had a chance to come across a New York gossip item like this.

No, this was good. Obviously, she’d have to fill him in on the whole fake relationship plan, but it could wait.

Good.

Great.

She couldn’t stop herself, though, from imagining what the night before might have gone like if Davis had kept his date with her.

Would he have left right in the middle of the event? Given her a quick peck on the cheek and been on his way, leaving her to make apologies for him? Maybe he would have stayed till the end, circulating and posing for photos with her, then slipped out as soon as the evening ended, disappearing again before they had even had two moments alone together.

That didn’t sit well either. But she brushed it aside. She was being ridiculous. Overly sensitive, perhaps because of the Ryder thing. Or the Noah thing.

Frankly, there were just too many things.

Her phone rang in her hand, jarring her out of her thoughts.

“Davis?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Ryder.”

And oddly, Vicky felt herself relax at the low, familiar rumble of his voice.

“Ten points, princess.”

She smiled, shook her head, and didn't bother telling him, again, not to call her princess. "What do you want, Ryder?"

"We are having dinner at my folks' place in two days," he said, his tone sardonic. "You know, as a couple."

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

"We'll be celebrating Noah and Sabrina's engagement."

Right.

That made sense. And she would need to be there because as far as any of them knew, she was now Ryder's girlfriend. And Noah's ex-girlfriend. Just one big, cozy family.

"And Noah and Sabrina will be there?" It didn't hurt to ask ...

"That's the general idea."

It was what she'd signed up for after all. And the Vicky-and-Ryder story definitely needed a less tawdry spin if she wanted to be taken seriously, both in business *and* her personal life.

So what if it meant enduring her ex's happiness being shoved in her still-mostly-single face? She could do this. She took a deep breath. "Sounds good. Shall I bring a bottle of wine?"

"I'll bring the wine. You bring the respectability."

She burst out laughing. Maybe an engagement dinner with her ex and his fiancée wasn't her idea of a fun evening. But maybe with Ryder at her side it wouldn't be so terrible.

CHAPTER NINE

*T*his. Was. Terrible.

Somehow it hadn't occurred to Vicky that by agreeing to attend this dinner, she would not only have to, you know, *attend the dinner*, but that it would also mean being back in the Princes' Upper East Side townhouse for the first time since she and Noah had broken up.

Every corner and floorboard was *so* familiar. She had practically grown up here, of course, spending plenty of time here even before she and Noah had been a couple. But after. After she had been here for dinner after dinner, anniversaries, birthdays, business deal celebrations. Always as part of the family. As Noah's other half.

And now it was the same. Except her part had been taken over by an adorably spunky blonde she had met a handful of times at the office, and Vicky was now on the outside looking in. It was like some twisted *Twilight Zone* version of her life. What it had been. What she had thought it always would be.

A glass of wine appeared before her. She snatched it away from the hand offering it and took a healthy swallow.

A low chuckle grazed her ear. "I thought you might need that."

She looked to her side. Ryder grinned to himself as he downed half his own glass.

"Remind me again why this is a good idea?" she asked.

“It isn’t. I told you it wasn’t. But then you rarely listen to others when you’re sure you’re right.”

She laughed quietly into her drink.

He gave her a sidelong glance. “It’s one of the things I admire most about you.”

“You admire things about me?” She arched a brow.

“I must. Or you never would have talked me into this.” He gave her one of his devilishly charming looks. She felt a blush creep up her neck. Must be the wine.

“What are we talking about?” Noah appeared between them, flinging an arm over each of their shoulders.

Vicky stiffened. “Noah. Hi! Congratulations!”

“Yeah,” Ryder threw in dryly. “Mazel tov.”

Noah squeezed his arms around them, just a little too roughly. “Oh, but it seems that it’s me that should be congratulating you two. I can’t wait to hear all about how my big brother here won your heart.”

Ryder flashed a saccharine smile at Noah. “Oh, but I don’t see how that’s any of your business, seeing as how you and Vic only have a *professional* relationship these days. Your choice, as I recall.”

A look of hurt flitted across Noah’s soft brown eyes, but he covered it quickly.

“Vicky is still a close friend, and her well-being is absolutely my concern.”

But even as he said it, Vicky wondered if it was really true. They’d moved past the breakup. And she really did believe they hadn’t been well suited for each other romantically. Their business partnership was intact. And after those first few rocky months, they had definitely settled back into cordial. Friendly even. But close?

No. She realized now that she thought about it, they were not close. Not anymore.

And that made her sad all over again. She had lost not just a boyfriend, but her oldest friend.

Ryder leaned past her to get in Noah's face. "If you were so concerned about her well-being, maybe you shouldn't have ___"

"Say cheese!" Cheryl stepped in front of them holding a camera and an expression of forced cheer. Thank goodness. If Vicky had thought the Prince brothers didn't get along before, that was nothing compared to how much they didn't get along now that the one thought she was dating the other.

She smiled a grateful smile at their mother, who offered her a conspiratorial wink in response.

Cheryl had always been one of her favorite people, but right now, she could just kiss her.

"Okay, *children*, squish in closer so I can get you all in the picture." Mrs. Prince eyed both her sons. "And no pinching!"

On either side of her, the Prince boys groaned in unison, sounding so much alike that she almost laughed. *Well played, Cheryl.*

But instead of taking the shot, the older woman raised her gaze to look behind them. "You too, dear! Don't be shy. You're part of the family now."

"Um, okay, I'll just ..." Noah's tiny fiancée attempted to squeeze into the group as unobtrusively as possible, stepping in next to Noah. "Sorry. Okay. Is this good?"

Cheryl studied them and shook her head.

"No, no. It doesn't look right with you way over on the end like that. Let's get the girls in the center together."

Sabrina slid past Noah to stand next to Vicky, making her feel like an Amazon. The smaller woman smiled up at her as they pressed in together. "Sorry. Hi." She laughed nervously. She leaned over, and added in a whisper, "So, is it just me, or do I look like one of the munchkins here with you all?"

Sabrina was trying to be friendly, and Vicky wanted to respond in kind. She did. This evening couldn't be all that

comfortable for Sabrina either. But Vicky had her own problems to worry about, so all she managed was a tight smile.

“Hold still!” Cheryl’s flash went off, nearly blinding them. “There!”

Warren now wandered in blissfully oblivious, presumably having been working in his study until the last second.

“Ah, good. Everyone’s here. Let’s eat!”



THEY WERE HALFWAY through the main course, and his dad had failed to acknowledge his presence, which, frankly, was just fine by Ryder. His mom was mostly busy fussing over her daughter-in-law to be.

But even though this was the first family dinner he had attended in years—and admittedly, he had missed Armand’s cooking—Ryder was mainly concerned about Vic.

She was trying to make out like none of this bothered her, but clearly it did.

Did she still have feelings for Noah? Was that it? He didn’t think so. It was more like she was just painfully uncomfortable being there. Who the hell could blame her?

They did seem to be trying to make her feel welcome, but he of all people knew what it was like to endure a forced evening in this house, acutely aware that you didn’t really belong.

He could only imagine how hard this was for Vic, not only having to sit here and pretend she was involved with the likes of him—that had to be a joy—but also to celebrate Noah’s happiness, even though it had come at her expense.

Deep down, he knew it wasn’t Noah’s fault. Well, it *was* because the idiot had gone after her in the first place. But they’d never been right. Ryder had known that from the start. Vic had always been passionate and strong-willed, even if she

hid it under a layer of propriety. Way too much for his poor sweet, perfect little brother.

It was good for all involved they were no longer together. But he still wanted to punch the guy in the face for breaking Vic's heart.

“So”—Noah eyed him suspiciously three bites into the beef Wellington—“when did you say you two got together?”

Beside him, Vic folded and unfolded her napkin in her lap. He reached over and took her hand, giving it a little squeeze.

“Mmm, yes,” said Warren, washing down the bite of asparagus with a sip of wine. “I’m curious as well. How *did* beauty and the beast get together?”

Cheryl shot him a warning look. “Warren.”

“What, dear? Aren’t we all wondering? I’m sure there’s a fascinating story there. They’ve known each other since they were practically children. Have they been pining away all this time? Making secret eyes at each other while Victoria was seeing Noah?” He chuckled in a way that was meant to convey humor but made Ryder want to topple the table and storm out.

Vicky squeezed his hand, still resting in her lap. He looked over at her, catching on her warm, reassuring eyes, and half his anger melted away. Half.

“Well,” began Cheryl, hesitantly, “I will admit I was a bit confused by it.”

“Yes, it *is* a bit confusing, isn’t it?” Noah leaned in toward him. He was probably trying to look menacing, but with his floppy hair and generally boyish looks, he wasn’t close to pulling it off. “What I’m trying to understand is what Ryder here, with what, a woman in every port, right? What Ryder would want with someone respectable like Vicky.”

Now Vicky squeezed his hand tighter. Her leg began to bounce. The nerve of the little punk. Making snide remarks about him was one thing, but going after Vic? Because as far as Noah knew, this was Vic’s choice. So first he rubs her face in his engagement, and now he’s decided she can’t be trusted

to make her own decisions. Ryder locked his eyes menacingly on Noah's.

"It's not her respectability I like her for."

Noah just about lunged across the table at him. Sabrina laid a hand on his arm, and he sat back. Begrudgingly.

There. That was almost fun.

Oh. Except maybe he shouldn't have said that, given the whole point of this performance was to remove the air of scandal Vicky's association with him carried. But when he looked at her, the corner of her mouth curved up ever so slightly. Huh. Okay, then.

There was a long, awkward pause, and then good ol' mom came to the rescue. "Soooo, Sabrina, Noah, I know it's early, but have you given any thought to your wedding plans?"

"Oh! Yes!" said Sabrina, looking beyond grateful for an easy subject. "Actually, we've decided we want the ceremony to be held at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park."

"That sounds lovely! I didn't know you could book the place for private events."

Sabrina stole a look at Noah. "Well, normally you can't easily. But I have a connection there with the technical director. We can have the entire complex as long as we do it before the season begins."

Cheryl knit her brows. "The season?"

"Yes," said Sabrina. "The summer play season."

"*This* summer play season?" Cheryl blanched.

"That's right." Noah beamed. "We're planning a ceremony the first week of May."

Cheryl audibly gasped. "But that's so soon! How will you get everything done? You'll need a caterer, musicians, flowers, the invitation list! Sabrina will need a dress!"

"We'll handle it, Mom."

"I don't see how!"

“Noah,” Warren piped in sternly, “you’re upsetting your mother.”

Ryder had to bite his cheek to keep from grinning. If he had known he’d get to see the golden son screwing up, he wouldn’t have been so hesitant to come tonight.

“What about an engagement party?” Cheryl continued. “You know at our level of society people will expect it.”

Sabrina glanced uncertainly at Noah. He took her hand. Always in command. Of course. Ryder resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“We’ve thought of that as well, Mom. We’re planning to have a small engagement party in a couple weeks.”

“A couple weeks!!”

Wow. He hadn’t seen his mom this upset since his public nudity arrest in Monaco!

“Noah!” scolded Warren. Always so helpful.

Ryder felt a little sorry for Sabrina, who couldn’t have known what she was getting into. But only a little since she was, after all, marrying Prince Charming. (And anyway, she’d be *fine*. Because she was, after all, marrying Prince Charming. She’d be golden by association—forever. This would blow over.)

For right now, though, Ryder was mainly working to contain his glee so as to avoid incurring parental wrath and inadvertently taking the heat off poor, squirming Noah.

But when he glanced over at Vic to see if she was sharing any of his amusement, he quickly sobered.

CHAPTER TEN

Wicky couldn't breathe. Suddenly the room—an enormous formal dining room with twelve-foot ceilings—was closing in on her. She thought she'd been doing okay, but she had clearly been deluding herself.

Noah was getting married in May? *May*? As in a few short months from then?

She'd known he'd been serious about Sabrina. Of course she had, even though he'd tried to be sensitive and not rub his new relationship in her face. So honestly, the engagement announcement had been a shock perhaps, but not a surprise.

But she had barely (okay, not at all) adjusted to *that* new reality, and now he was going to be married before summer?

He might be married before she even managed to arrange an actual date with Davis, she thought ruefully.

And now an engagement party? In a few weeks? There would be press coverage. It would be, after all, a society event. Reporters would be all over her, asking what she thought of it all.

And as Ryder's "girlfriend," she was going to have a front-row seat.

Noah was now saying something about having contacted Ivy Steadman to plan the whole thing.

That didn't even make sense. Ivy was PR, not event planning. And for the last couple of years, the Pink Heart Ball was the only major project she handled outside her position at

ZephyrTech. Though she was an incredibly effective organizer. And exactly the sort of kindhearted soul who would help out a friend in need. And she *had*, in fact, gotten her start in high-end event planning years ago. Her reputation had been impeccable.

Vicky now suddenly remembered a conversation where she'd joked with Noah about what it might take to persuade Ivy to come out of retirement for one special engagement. Back when she thought they'd soon be planning their own wedding.

She suddenly felt as if she might be ill. She could not throw up here, in the middle of this civilized dinner, all over the antique lace tablecloth.

At that moment, she became vaguely aware that Ryder was watching her. For how long, she couldn't be sure, but by the look on his face, long enough to know she wasn't doing so well.

"Hey." He leaned toward her. "Hey, you okay?"

With the others currently involved in an intense discussion over how late was too late to send a "save the date," Vicky had a split second to make a decision. Ideally, she would compose herself, smile, and show everyone how absolutely fine she was with all this.

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

Ryder was still watching her, looking genuinely concerned.

"Princess?"

To hell with it. She grabbed his hand and pulled him out of his chair, dragging him along the hallway until the voices in the dining room had receded into the background. (Mercifully, they seemed so involved in their conversation no one commented on their hasty exit.) She dragged Ryder into the nearest room and shut the door behind them.

They were now squeezed together in a very small powder room. She held a hand to her chest, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm herself.

Ryder regarded her with amusement.

“Come here often?”

She slapped his chest. “Stop.”

And he did. He watched her for a moment.

“Vic?”

“Yes?” Now that they were away from the others, she could feel her racing heart starting to slow a little.

“Why are we here?”

She looked up at him now, meeting his eyes. They were surprisingly soft.

“I don’t know. I had to get out of there. I was feeling claustrophobic.”

He nodded. “Right. And naturally you thought cramming the two of us into a room the size of a hamster cage would be the best way to fix that.” He grinned, his eyes twinkling, but he never took them off hers.

Her heart rate picked up again.

“I need to calm down. Say things to calm me down.”

“Okay ... Well, let’s see. How about my family are idiots? And my brother is an idiot. In fact, I think the two of us should go elope just to rub it in his idiot face. And also, you’re much better off without him. Because he’s an idiot.”

She gave a little laugh and leaned back against the sink. “He’s not, though.”

Ryder scowled. “Agree to disagree.”

“He is suspicious, which isn’t helping. And overprotective —”

“Which he has no right being.”

“Which is sweet.” He eyed her skeptically, so she added, “In a way.” She sighed. “I just ... I didn’t anticipate how hard this was going to be. Coming back here, still being part of the family, but you know ... *not*.”

“Welcome to my world,” he said ruefully, and she instantly regretted what she’d said. She felt a pang of sadness for him, oddly mixed with a kind of kinship.

“When we agreed to our plan,” she said, “I was thinking about the press, the public. What everyone on the outside would see. I didn’t necessarily think about what that would mean we—I—would have to do in order to pull off that illusion. And I certainly wasn’t prepared to sit around the dinner table making polite conversation about wedding venues.”

“Hey, now. You didn’t know all this wedding stuff was going to happen. *Your* plan was a perfectly reasonable fake relationship scheme.”

“Why do I feel like you’re mocking me?”

He flashed a guilty smile. “Only just a little.”

And strangely, somehow, this made her feel a tiny bit better. Suddenly she could think straight again.

“Okay. Okay. This is what we’re going to do,” she announced. “We’ll stick with the original plan. Except we’ll need to keep it going just a little longer—wait until a week or two after the engagement party so we don’t become the story and steal the spotlight from the happy couple. Then we’ll break up in as boring a way possible and go back to our regular lives. In the meantime, we’ll make excuses to avoid as many future family gatherings as we possibly can. Work for you?”

He blinked at her a few times. “Works for me.”

“Good. Me too.” She held out her hand to seal the deal.

He eyed her hand, looking for a second like he might make a snide comment. But in the end, he just took it and gave it a firm shake.

Before she could let go, though, the doorknob rattled. And then, because apparently it hadn’t occurred to either of them to lock it, it started to turn.

She panicked.

She tightened her grip, wrapping her fingers around his, and pulled him across the six inches between them so that she was now pressed tight between him and the sink counter. As the door swung open, she latched her lips onto his.

“OhmygodI’msosorry!” Sabrina blurted, immediately slamming the door shut again. But the sound receded into the background as Ryder’s warmth, musky smell, and general overpowering presence muddled her senses.

We can probably stop now, some distant part of her brain thought. Ryder leaned into her, intensifying the kiss, and another, louder part of her brain thought, *Wow, he really is a good kisser.*

There was a light rap at the door, and it opened again, just a crack. “Hey, though, I just wanted to say—you guys are so cute!” Sabrina whispered on the other side of the door. Then it shut again with a quiet click. Light footsteps retreated in the hall.

She and Ryder pulled apart, just enough to make eye contact. She felt him begin to shake with silent laughter, gently at first, but soon he could hardly contain himself. And neither could she.

He rested his forehead against hers, and they stood there pressed up against the sink in the tiny bathroom, laughing together.

NEW YORK MINUTE

News alert!!!

Just when you thought Noah Prince, a.k.a. Prince Charming, could not *possibly* shock you anymore ...

Remember how he and the lovely Sabrina Hopewell got engaged just a few short days ago?

That was pretty exciting, right? *We* certainly thought so. Let us tell you, we here at New York Minute wasted no time planning our coverage of *all* the events leading up to the big day. We were already counting on months and months and *months*—at least a couple of years' worth, TBH—of high society excitement. Everything from trying to get our hands on the sketches from whatever top designer was lucky enough to snag the dress gig, to getting the scoop on the cake tasting and which flavors were in or out, to which thousand of their few closest (and most glamorous) friends the happy couple planned to grace with wedding invitations (not to mention trying to get our eager little fingers on one of those hand-engraved babies so we could share it with you all).

But apparently, we aren't the only ones who wasted no time!

Mr. and soon-to-be-Ms. Prince issued a statement earlier today that their ceremony will take place in early May of this year. *This year*. This. Year.

We don't know how they're going to pull that off, but rumor has it Ivy Steadman (of Pink Heart Ball, ZephyrTech, and dating Alec Ames fame) has agreed to take on the

planning around the (insanely accelerated) event. Godspeed, Ms. Steadman.

As for us, we're going to go drown our sorrows in some cupcakes from Magnolia Bakery and then put on our big-blogger panties. Sigh. There goes a good year-plus of Prince wedding prep coverage. It's not that we're not happy for you, you guys. We just wish we could have savored the super magical American royalty moments. But we can't stay mad at you, lovebirds. Especially when we suspect you're just too freaking excited about this whole marriage thing to wait. (Aww.)

And to our gentle (ha!) readers: Don't worry, they're not forgoing the usual wedding ramp-up so much as compressing it. There will be an engagement party at the Prince Plaza Midtown in two weeks. (Yup, that's what we said. Two weeks. Maybe we better send some cupcakes to Ms. Steadman's office. She's going to need them.)

Look for our coverage of that event. We're not sure who'll be in attendance on such short notice, but we'll definitely be keeping our eyes peeled for New York's newest gossip-worthy couple, Victoria Ashby and *Ryder* Prince. After a *big* splash last week (in the form of a *big* kiss), we haven't heard much from either of them (though they *were* seen entering the Prince family home the other night for what appeared to be a quiet family meal) ... The question is, are Ryder and Vicky MIA because their love connection fizzled or because it's on *fi-ya*? Time (and hopefully this column) will tell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*F*izzle or fire? Those were her two options? She blinked incredulously at her computer. Oh, how she hated these gossip columns. They had to sensationalize *everything*.

Of course, she didn't disagree with their astonishment over Noah's accelerated engagement. She was still reeling.

She knew she was being silly. So Noah was getting married. Good for Noah. She needed to focus on her own life. Fixing this publicity problem with Ryder. Finding the next project for the foundation to champion. Investing time and energy in her relationship—or rather what she hoped would become her relationship—with Davis.

Maybe she would call him. She still needed to bring him up to speed on the Ryder situation, and since he was in Munich, he ought to be done working for the day. She could probably reach him at his hotel.

She opened his contact page on her phone, but before she could tap “call,” she noticed the location map updating. Huh. He wasn't in Munich anymore. He was ... in New Zealand?

It was early morning there. Best not to call and risk waking him. She tapped out a text.

Hi. What happened? Did you take a wrong turn at Istanbul? :-)

He didn't answer immediately, which didn't surprise her in the least. He'd get back to her when he was awake. And not in a meeting. Unless he had another flight to catch.

It wasn't that all the globe-trotting bothered her, per se, it was just—well, she wasn't sure what it was. She shook her head. It *didn't* bother her.

There was a light knock. She jumped.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you!”

She looked up to see Noah leaning in the open door, looking boyishly charming as ever.

“Hello,” she said. Something felt off internally. Oh, yes! She wasn't smiling. She made herself do so. “I didn't expect to see you in the office today. Weren't you and Sabrina meeting with Ivy today to go over the engagement party plans?”

“Yes, indeed, we went through the guest list this morning, and we'll be meeting with the caterer”—he glanced at his watch—“in an hour. Just popped by in between to make sure the staff didn't forget I still worked here.” He was positively giddy. It was hard not to find his enthusiasm adorable, even if you were his ex-girlfriend.

He took a step inside her office, his expression becoming more serious. “But I didn't come to talk about me. How are you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I'm worried about you.”

She squirmed a little in her seat, suddenly uncomfortable. She didn't want Noah's sympathy.

“I'm fine.”

“Victoria.” He glanced over his shoulder, before stepping all the way into the room and closing the door behind him. “I handled the end of our relationship abominably. I know that. I'm so sorry. And I know it can't have been easy, standing by as my business partner, all the while having to see me with someone new.”

Though it had been a full year, they really hadn't talked about it. Oh, he'd broken it off gently. He'd been kind. And a few weeks later, when he and Sabrina got together, he'd made

sure she heard it from him. But after that, they hadn't really discussed it.

And now, with his wedding on the horizon, for him to be thinking about *her* feelings, well, it was sweet and sensitive of him. She was glad to have it brought into the open finally. And she was grateful for his honesty. It helped. More than she would have guessed it might.

"It hasn't been easy," she confessed. "But I'm okay now. And I'm happy for you and Sabrina. Truly."

"I know. And it means a lot to me. You know I'll always care for you deeply. You're my oldest friend."

"And you're mine." This time her smile was entirely genuine.

He nodded. "Which is why I'm so concerned."

"Noah, really. You don't need to worry about me. It's true the wedding came as a surprise, but I'm adjusting and—"

He laid his hand over hers, quieting her. He fixed his eyes on hers.

"You're in a fragile place. It's my fault. And I feel it's my responsibility."

Well ... Wait.

"Noah. I'm a big girl—"

"I don't know what he's up to, Vicky, but you can't trust Ryder. You don't know him like I do."

Now she was offended on both their behalves. Whatever tensions there were running through the Prince family, whatever ill-advised behavior Ryder had engaged in, it had always been clear to her that he had a good heart.

"Are you sure *you* know him?"

Noah sighed. "I just want you to be careful, Vicky. I don't want to see you hurt. This kind of connection won't play well for you in the press, you know."

You don't say.

Did he really think she didn't know how to manage her public image? As a power player in what was still very much a man's world, she was used to being underestimated, but coming from Noah, this stung.

"Ryder and I will be just fine," she found herself biting off.

"He'll drop you as soon as the first lingerie model crosses his path. If he hasn't already."

She didn't know if she was more outraged at his assessment of her or his brother, but she wasn't exactly in the mood for a lecture on how to conduct her love life by her ex.

She stood, moving around her desk as she spoke. "Your concern is noted. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to attend to. As, I believe, do you."

She went to the door and swung it open.

He cleared his throat, straightened his tie, and took the hint. "All right. You know how to find me if you need me."

"Enjoy your meeting with the caterer." She smiled sweetly as he walked past.

She closed the door behind him.

Shutting her eyes, she mentally counted to ten. Her phone buzzed.

She grabbed it off her desk. It was Davis, writing her back.

Sorry. Biz thing. Catch up with you later in the week?

She dropped into her chair with a groan. How was this her life?

Her ex-boyfriend suddenly going all Neanderthal in shining armor and trying protect her from her own love life. Her almost boyfriend MIA. Her *fake* boyfriend ...

Her eyes landed on the New York Minute blog post, still on her computer screen.

Fizzle or fire. Pff. Fizzle or fire.

How about neither?

How about a perfectly respectable adult relationship? (That would just happen to end three weeks from Tuesday.)

Maybe she couldn't stop Noah from trying to be her savior. Maybe she couldn't stop Davis from spending more time in the air than he did with her.

But she could damn well control this. Fire or fizzle, indeed.

She picked up the phone and dialed her fake boyfriend.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“*T*ell me why we’re here again?” Ryder bent down to peer through a miniature sterling-silver-framed greenhouse set on the pedestal between them. She could just see his dubious dark eyes over the paper flowers and birds the Tiffany staff had arranged inside.

“To buy Noah and Sabrina an engagement present.” Wow. Was that ever going to sound normal? *Just shopping for my boyfriend and his new girlfriend—I mean fiancée—I mean wife.* Ugh. She strolled along the walls of the fourth floor alcove, browsing the luxury gifts.

He laughed. “No offense, Vic, but you don’t need me for that. I don’t even know what half this stuff is.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Well, *that* is a greenhouse.”

“For what, fancy Smurfs?”

“For *display.*”

He stood, meeting her eyes again over the little structure. Staring her down.

“Fine.” She relented. “I need you to be *seen with me* buying an engagement present.”

“Ah. Now we’re getting somewhere.” He flashed her a lopsided smile.

God help her, her insides melted just a tiny bit.

This was good stuff, though. Exactly what they needed. She glanced around surreptitiously. There were no paparazzi, of course. Tiffany & Co. would never have allowed them inside. But there were several clerks on the floor who clearly recognized them. And most promisingly, a family of tourists who she was pretty sure had followed them from the ground floor.

They were keeping their distance, but she'd caught them whispering and looking in their direction. All she and Ryder needed was for them to snap a photo or two of the two of them looking like a totally boring and non-scandalous couple shopping for friends and then post them on Instagram or Share Spot or something like that. They would go viral instantly, and the gossip columns would pick them up from there. Ryder had helpfully shown up in a nice suit as requested. Everything was going according to plan.

Ryder nodded toward the tourist mom, who was now not-so-successfully attempting to hide behind a display of crystal barware, clearly trying to take a picture with her phone. "Looks like we have a fan."

Vicky laughed, tossing her head back, even though he hadn't said anything funny. She definitely didn't want the story to be "Vicky Ashby Miserable Picking Out Engagement Gift for Ex."

Ryder chuckled softly. He took a step closer, leaning in so only she could hear. "You want me to kiss you again? Make Noah jealous?" He waggled his eyebrows.

She flushed, quickly glancing back at their friend, who was still holding up her phone. Was she taking video?

"Not the way you look like you're thinking about kissing me," she hissed at Ryder. "We're trying to kill those kinds of stories, remember?"

She laughed loudly again for good measure, then added as an afterthought, "And I don't care if Noah is jealous. I *do* care if the world sees us doing respectable couple things together."

He picked an item off the shelf next to them. “You mean like buying one of these very expensive ... Is this a bubble wand?”

She examined it. Apparently, yes, it was a bubble wand.

“Well, maybe not that,” she said, taking it from him and putting it back on the shelf, “but we do need to find something.”

She glanced over his shoulder at the tourist family, who all simultaneously developed a sudden fascination with serving trays as soon as they saw her looking their way. She pretended not to notice them, instead reaching out and taking Ryder’s hand. “Come on, let’s go look over here.”

She pulled him along behind her to an arrangement of gift items in the alcove opposite them, watching the family follow (at a safe distance) out of the corner of her eye.

She stopped at a table to peruse a collection of basic everyday items crafted in high-end materials. They were sort of ridiculous—tape measures and coffee cans and a *crazy straw* at exorbitant prices. What she could do if everyone who bought one of these donated the money to the foundation instead.

But she wasn’t really browsing. She was giving a performance.

Ryder whispered, “How many people do you think have bought one of those coffee cans and then accidentally recycled it?”

She giggled.

“Seriously,” he said. “How much do you think it weighs? Do you think you can tell the difference?” He released his grip on her hand, presumably to reach for the object, but she held tight, pulling him back toward her in a way that made their shoulders bump together.

He looked down at her in amusement.

“Aw, sweetheart, can’t bear to let me go, can you?”

She flicked her eyes in the direction of the tourists, who were now lurking just at the edge of the alcove, supremely interested in the wallpaper, it seemed. She stared at him meaningfully.

“Right. Of course.”

She cleared her throat. “Let’s look over here, darling.”

She thought she heard him swallow a snort behind her, but he covered quickly with a cough. She stopped at a collection of picture frames. Their backs were to the tourists, but the wall behind the shelf was mirrored, so she could watch their movements in the reflection.

She tipped her head and leaned against Ryder’s shoulder.

He leaned down and planted a surprisingly tender kiss on her forehead. His lips were soft, warming her skin where they touched. Mmm.

Right. Focus. *Focus*.

Clearly, she had been without a man in her life for too long. Behind her, she caught the tourist mom practically exploding with glee. Her teenage daughter appeared to be restraining her.

Ryder spoke, low and husky and so close his breath caressed her ear. “So ...” Mmmm. “Don’t you have a boyfriend? How does he feel about this whole fake relationship thing anyway? You never did tell me.”

Vicky jerked upright, becoming suddenly enthralled with a sterling piggy bank. She snatched it up. “What do you think of this?”

Ryder chuckled. “I think that was a very interesting reaction to my question.”

She put the piggy bank down and pretended to examine an artfully misshapen bowl. “I haven’t told him yet.” Then, louder, “Oh, look! Crystal candlesticks!”

She crossed over to them, but Ryder didn’t follow. She turned back to see him grinning an exasperatingly smug,

knowing grin at her. He strolled—no, *strutted*—in her direction.

He leaned in and leered at her. “Oh you haven’t, have you?” His voice was low, but his smoldering intent was on display for all to see as evidenced by the flustered giggles escaping from both the mom *and* the daughter behind them.

He was laying it on a bit thick, but she could work with this. She slapped him in the chest playfully. “You’re incorrigible.” She made sure her face was angled slightly toward the camera—which she couldn’t help but notice was aimed in their direction again—so her carefree smile would be captured.

But Ryder grabbed her hand and held it against him. His deep-brown eyes searched hers. “Careful there,” he said in a voice meant just for her. “You don’t want to look like you’re having *too* much fun.”

Heat washed through her from head to toe. She didn’t? No, right, she didn’t!

She swallowed. Maybe she couldn’t work with this. She needed a cold shower. And Davis! She needed Davis! Her actual—practically—boyfriend. Not this guy, with his dangerous charm and his sexy eyes.

And—most importantly—she needed photos of them *not* looking like the scandal of the year.

She dropped his hand and pulled away. “You’re right.” And then, remembering where she was and what she was doing. “An engraved picture frame would be perfect.”

She thought she saw a flicker of disappointment cross Ryder’s face, but then he nodded. “Lead the way.”



AFTER THAT, it didn’t take much time to pick out a frame—simple yet elegant, personal yet distanced. They arranged for it to be engraved with Noah’s and Sabrina’s names as well as the date of the wedding (still too shockingly soon to seem real).

Once they were merely standing at the counter, handling the transaction, and signing the paperwork with an older gentleman clerk, the tourist family lost interest in them, wandering off to gawk at some other New York curiosity presumably.

As they prepared to leave the store, she noticed Ryder looking into a jewelry case, eyebrows knit. She was still feeling a little awkward about earlier, but something about his expression made her heart squeeze.

She leaned over beside him. “I never pegged you for the tennis-bracelet type,” she teased. “But that would look lovely with the matching pendant.”

He sighed. “I probably should get my mom something for her birthday.”

It was coming up in a few weeks. There was a big surprise party planned (as always—she didn’t think Cheryl had been surprised in years, but it was tradition by now). Vicky already knew what she was getting her. It was sort of sweet to see Ryder worrying about his gift. “Not a bad idea.”

He ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. “I never know what to get, though. It would probably help if we spoke more than a couple times a year. I usually just get roses. But now that I’ve been seeing her so much this trip, that seems sort of inadequate.” He moved down the case.

“Maybe earrings?”

He looked lost. Did he actually want to make some kind of peace offering to Cheryl? That would be amazing. For both of them. For the whole family. Not that it was *her* family, she reminded herself. But still. Cheryl was so special to her. And poor Ryder seemed so alone ...

“I could ... Did you ...?” She cleared her throat. “I already had an idea for what I was going to get her. In fact, I was going to pick it up after we were done here. Maybe it would make sense for us to give her something together this year?”

He just sort of stared at her.

God, what a stupid thing to say. What was she thinking? He was barely a willing partner in their totally fake relationship. Of course, he didn't want her interfering in his relationship with his family.

“Okay,” he said, jarring her out of her thoughts.

“Okay?”

His eyebrows pinched together, and he looked a little confused for a moment before he shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ryder was weirdly happy to be shopping for a birthday gift for his mother. She'd be pleased with him. There was that. He wouldn't have thought it, but it seemed that was still something he got a (begrudgingly) good feeling from. At least if the past few days were any indication.

But also, he was relieved that after the awkwardness in Tiffany, Vic had still agreed to spend more time with him. He'd been toying with her (mostly). Her feathers were definitely fun to ruffle. But he didn't want to ruffle them so much she didn't want him around.

That idea sent a sharp pang through him. He didn't feel much attachment to anyone these days, and he couldn't explain why Vic was suddenly any different. But the idea of not having her around made him ... well, kind of sad. There was no denying he had grown a little attached to her in the short time they'd spent together. Which was not his thing—at all—but there it was. Maybe it was because she didn't treat him like a pariah.

There was no denying she was a gorgeous woman. An appealing woman. Sexy and powerful and—speaking of ruffling—

But no. He had plenty of women with various combinations of those attributes to choose from. What he didn't have was one who knew him and liked him and, at least for the time being, wanted him around. Until now.

So he would help her with her PR strategy and keep any other thoughts that might arise to himself.

Vicky's gift plan for his mother had been season tickets to the ballet series at Lincoln Center. She was right, Cheryl was going to love those. He remembered now watching her watch such things on TV when he was a child. Before the Prince Resort Hotels chain had taken off, when money was, if not tight, at least something they thought about before they spent, and the city was somewhere they went occasionally on special occasions.

He had a memory of climbing up onto the couch next to her when he was still a little kid and Noah was barely more than a baby. Sleeping in his crib, probably, at the time. Just him and his mom. She tried to explain *Swan Lake* to him, but he wasn't interested. So instead, he just curled up at her side and fell asleep to the strains of the orchestra.

Anyway.

She would love those tickets.

It was twilight as they left the box office, strolling back across the paved plaza toward Vic's waiting town car. He would see her off, then hail a cab and head ... well, home. Because his agreement with Vicky wouldn't let him do most of the things he might normally do with a night to kill in New York. But also because he didn't feel much like calling up the usual suspects, partying, or getting into trouble. Huh. Go figure. The princess must be rubbing off on him.

It was unseasonably warm—in the low sixties he'd guess. Crazy for February. Vic and his Boy Scout brother ought to throw some of those foundation funds at global warming if they weren't already. But the air was pleasant and the plaza fairly empty in the darkening light.

As they walked by the fountain in the center of the plaza, the lights flicked on, setting the pillars of water alight with a magical glow.

Beside him, Vicky let out a tiny squeal. Kind of like a little kid. It was adorable.

He looked over at her. “Everything all right there?”

She stopped to watch the water dance. “I’ve always loved this fountain.” A smile of pure delight spread across her face as she stared into the glimmering streams. “All fountains, really.”

“I was once detained for wading in one of the fountains at Versailles with some buddies of mine.”

“I remember that! There were photos.”

“Totally worth it.” He grinned.

“I thought it looked like fun.” She sat on the wide, flat marble that circled the fountain and reached her hand toward the water. “I could never do something like that.”

She sounded wistful almost. And he didn’t like how it made *him* feel. Why did she put limits on herself like that? She had always done it, and it had always bothered him.

“Do it.”

She turned back to him. “Do what?”

“The fountain. Go”—he made a vague waving motion—“you know, frolic in it.”

She cracked up. “I’m not going to ‘frolic’ in the fountain.”

Suddenly it became very important to him that she allow herself to do something fun. Just because she wanted to.

“Come on. I dare you.” He reached his hand out to her.

His sleeve rode up, and the edge of his tattoo peeked out from under the fabric. Vic took his hand, gently pushing the sleeve higher, examining the art.

She touched her finger to it, tracing the lines of his creation. “You were so good. Do you still draw?”

The question and the touch, both more intimate than he was used to, did things to him he didn’t have time to examine now.

“Don’t change the subject. Let’s go.” He stepped onto the circular platform and reached for her again. “I’ll come with

you.”

She stared at him. Great, she was going to tell him how irresponsible and stupid this was. How even though it was too dark for recognizable photos and there was hardly anyone around, this would definitely result in a story on Page Six about how what a degenerate and general terrible influence he was and how far she had fallen in (mock) dating him.

She threw a glance over her shoulder, probably looking for the photographer that would seal their downfall or maybe just searching for an escape route, having finally realized what a terrible idea a fake relationship with *him* actually was.

But then she turned back to him and, much to his astonishment, broke into a wide smile. “All right!”

She took his hand, and he pulled her up beside him. She looked around again, then twisted her foot up and bent to take off a shoe. He just stood there gawping at her. Was she really going to do this? He couldn’t quite believe it.

When she went for her other shoe, she lost her balance, stumbling against him. He grabbed her at the waist to steady her. She looked up into his eyes.

Time froze for a second.

He was struck with an overwhelming urge to kiss her. Not like the night outside the Pink Heart Ball. Not to tease her or push her out of her regimented comfort zone or even to see what she would do, but just because he wanted to.

But then she giggled and bent to wrench off the remaining shoe, and the moment was gone. Just as well. This was a fake relationship. And he didn’t do real ones. Bad-boy black sheep rarely did.

Vic had bent down to fuss with her skirt, and he now realized she was unhooking her stockings from unseen garters. He felt a blush rise on his neck—a *very* unusual occurrence for him, but then this was a very unusual circumstance. He looked away.

“Come on, now,” she teased behind him. “We had a deal! I assume you’re not going in in those Italian loafers.”

Right.

He bent his foot up to remove the shoe, turning to face her just in time to see her dipping her toe into the spray.

“Oooh! Okay, it’s a little cold, but I can handle it. How about you?”

She turned to him, mischief twinkling in her amber eyes, the spirit he’d always known lay inside but that she usually kept buttoned up and hidden on display for all to see.

No. Not for everyone.

Just for him.

“Hey!” A harsh voice came from far off, bouncing off the hard surfaces of the pavement and buildings. “Hey, you!”

They turned to see a heavy-set security guard lumbering their way.

“No wading in the fountain!” The man squinted at them, evidently unable to make them out clearly in the dim light.

Ryder froze, but Vic let out a startled yelp. She hopped down from the raised platform, shoes and stockings still in hand. She motioned to him frantically. “Come on!” she hissed.

Yeah, probably best to get out of there, especially if they were looking to avoid headlines involving petty crimes.

He climbed down and followed after her—she was halfway to the car already, scampering at a pretty good speed for someone in a pencil skirt. Ryder ducked his head to join her in the back of the town car just as he heard the guard behind him swear. “Damn hooligans.”

Ryder slammed the door shut, and the driver pulled the car into traffic.

He swallowed, afraid to look at Vicky. This was exactly what they were supposed to *not* do—draw negative attention to themselves. He didn’t think they’d been recognized. But that didn’t make him feel any better. He’d egged her on, and she was the one whose reputation would suffer if they got

more salacious publicity. Heaven knew his reputation couldn't get any worse.

“Vic, I ...”

And then he heard her. Little sounds escaping, her body shaking gently at first, then more violently, until finally she gasped for breath, and it exploded out of her.

She was laughing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Back home in her Park Avenue apartment, Vicky showered, slipped on her silk pajamas, ordered Thai food, answered a dozen emails, and *still* couldn't get the afternoon out of her head.

She kept replaying the scene at the fountain. The play of the lights in the darkening plaza, Ryder daring her to break the rules, the brisk spray of water on her bare legs, Ryder gazing down at her, just inches away, looking like he might ...

Okay, no. This was no good.

She closed her laptop and set it on the coffee table, picking up the remote.

She flicked on the TV, flipping through the channels. A news report on unfilled potholes. A documentary on toads. Finally, she stopped on a movie channel. Ooh, *Love, Actually*. She'd always enjoyed this one.

She curled her legs up under her on the plush sofa. Colin Firth was typing on loose sheets of paper outside (really, why would anyone do that?), when his non-English-speaking maid accidentally lifted his paperweight, and naturally, a gust of wind blew all of poor Colin's papers into the pond.

Now the maid was jumping in and of course so was Colin, and they were both complaining about how cold it was and splashing around. It struck Vicky that this was exactly what would have happened had she and Ryder actually made it into the fountain at Lincoln Center.

She began to laugh, thinking about how very much unpleasant it would have been to have been soaking wet in New York in February, even if it was an unseasonably warm day. And Ryder! Good God, she could only imagine how clingy and cold his fitted suit would have felt after a dip in the water.

A mental image flashed of Ryder's normally artfully mussed hair weighed down and dripping, plastered to the side of his face. She dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Oh, she had to share this with him!

She muted the TV, grabbed her phone, and started a text:

Am realizing fountain was bad idea. Next time I propose hot tub and proper attire.

There now. Hmm, did it need an emoji, maybe? Was there a bathing suit? Or maybe a wink. Or ...

She stared at the phone screen, her laughter slowing and then dying away.

She blinked.

A hot tub. A hot tub?!

What was she doing? She couldn't text Ryder about a hot tub!

She didn't *want* to text Ryder about a hot tub.

She didn't want to text Ryder at all!

She—

Davis! She wanted to text Davis!

What was wrong with her? How did she keep letting this happen?

Of course, she wanted to text Davis. She was craving contact with Davis. In fact, pretending to be with someone else when she wanted to be with him was just amplifying those feelings.

And *that's* what texting Ryder—thinking about Ryder—was all about. That's all it was.

She was missing her boyfriend (well, nearly boyfriend), and there was Ryder playing the part, so naturally her mind would confuse and conflate the two. But what she really needed was to talk to her (nearly) boyfriend. *Davis*. Right now!

She quickly checked her locator app, not wanting to disturb Davis if he was still at the office (or wake him if he was on the other side of the world again). She smiled when she saw he was home.

Hey, you, she typed, adding a blushing emoji she hoped conveyed the right amount of warmth and flirtation.

Hi, sorry, can't text tonight. Huge meeting with Korean partners tomorrow. Plowing through on presentation now.

Oh. Right, of course, he was working from home. Any other man and she might suspect he was two-timing her, considering how frequently he put her off by telling her he was working. Except for two things. One, they'd have to have gotten to the stage of actually dating for it to be possible to two-time her. And two—

While I've got you, what do you think of these?

A series of images came through. Graphics charting profitability and workforce requirements.

—he wasn't any other man. And if she needed to worry about competition for his attention, other women weren't the problem.

She sighed.

They look nice. Maybe try a blue for the profit line. Make it pop more.

Yes! Fantastic, thank you! Sorry, but must get back to it. Talk soon?

Talk soon.

She set the phone down. On the television, Liam Neeson was giving terrible relationship advice to his adorable stepson. She clicked it off with a sigh and sat alone in her quiet

apartment, trying not to think about the way Ryder had looked at her at the fountain. And failing miserably.



RYDER Poured himself another Scotch and gazed out his apartment window at the city lit up below. He had to hand it to his little brother. Half the world might think he was perfect, but there was no denying he had royally screwed up letting Vicky go.

No way *he* would have made that mistake. Of course, he would never have had the chance, steamy fake kisses in his parents' bathroom and strangely longing looks at Lincoln Center aside.

Nope, opportunities like being with a woman like Vic were for golden boys like Noah to piss away as they pleased. Jerks like Ryder would never be so lucky.

His phone buzzed, and for a second, he thought it might be Vic texting him, but when he looked, he saw it was from Francesca, an aerial artist and social media influencer he saw from time to time when he was in the city.

Hey, I heard u were in town! How come u didn't call?

He sighed. Why hadn't he called her?

Well, there was the small matter that he probably shouldn't be seen out partying while he was fake dating Victoria Ashby to restore her reputation.

Sorry. Been busy.

I KNOW. I read NYMinute, u know.

Right. How could he explain this without telling her it was all a lie? Needless to say, Vic would kill him if he told someone with five million followers what was really going on. But before he could think of how to respond, she texted again.

Hey, ur biz is ur biz. I just wanted to know if u want to hang out?

Oh. Okay then. “Hang out” being barely veiled code for more than hanging out. Apparently, his supposed relationship with Vicky wasn’t an obstacle. Well, this he could answer.

Sorry, F. You’ll have to survive without me.

He was going for cocky with a side of charm, but when her next text came through, he knew that wasn’t her major take away.

Holy shit! I guess the NY Minute folks got it right. Never thought I’d see the day Ryder Prince was so whipped he got boring.

She ended with a kiss emoji to soften the blow. He responded with a shrug emoji, because what else could he say without disclosing the truth?

No more texts came through, and he slid his phone into his pocket, looking out at the city lights.

The truth.

What was the truth? That he couldn’t go out with another woman as long as he was supposed to be with Victoria. Or even stay in, for that matter, since there was no way to be sure someone wouldn’t spot her entering or leaving his place and sell them out to the press.

But more than that, if he was honest with himself, the truth was that spending the evening with another woman didn’t sound all that appealing to him right at the moment.

He sipped his drink and tried not to think about what Vicky was doing right then. He failed.

NEW YORK MINUTE

The Ryder/Vicky plot thickens! Mr. Prince and Ms. Ashby were spotted together shopping at Tiffany—Don't freak, they were looking at gifts, not engagement rings—but on the other hand, maybe we should kinda freak, right? Because hello?! Since *when* does Ryder never-met-a-scandal-he-didn't-love Prince do sweet, normal, boring domestic things like go gift shopping with a well-bred woman?

Could this mean—dare we even say it? Is the prodigal Prince giving up his wicked ways and going, for lack of a better word, legit? Huh. Not sure how we feel about that. Where else are we going to get that kind of entertainment?

(On the other hand, we do admit ... we kinda like these two together. Check out these adorable pics of them browsing vases and candy dishes and such, captured by a mom from Minnesota on vacation with her fam. And stay tuned.)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Vicky held a takeout cappuccino in each hand. She threw her head back and tossed her hair, trying to loosen up. This sent her gym bag swinging on her elbow. She took a breath and fixed her gaze on the lights indicating the floor numbers as the elevator made its smooth, silent ascent.

This was fine, she reminded herself. It was fine. She and Ryder were partners right now, working on the same project. She didn't know why, exactly, the urge to see Ryder had struck her, but it didn't matter, did it? It was probably her subconscious trying to make sure they were in sync on their partnership. Their business arrangement. Nothing wrong with dropping in to touch base with your business partner. Which was exactly what she was doing.

Okay, yes, she could have called. But she actually *had* been in the neighborhood after her morning at the gym, so this just made sense. Right?

Right. She was being ridiculous. She was here to see her associate. Her *friend*. Not to mention she and Ryder really did need to talk strategy before the upcoming engagement party.

The elevator dinged, announcing its arrival at his floor. She stepped out, the plush carpet muting the sound of her heels as she turned and walked to Ryder's door.

Okay. So. Here she went.

Crap.

How was she going to knock on the door with everything in her hands? Maybe she could use the crook of her arm to ... no, that didn't work. Or maybe she could just put her bag ... ow! Coffee sloshed out of one of the cups, onto her fingers.

"Dammit," she said, a little louder than she meant to.

Finally, she managed to balance one of the paper cups on the plastic lid of the other, freeing up a hand to knock on—

Ryder's door swung open before she could. She jumped in surprise, causing the top cup to wobble on its precarious perch. Ryder, demonstrating some kind of superhuman reflex, snatched it just as it started to fall.

"Whoa, there!"

"Oh my God, thank you, I—" It was at this point that she really looked at him. "I ... I'm sorry, what are you wearing?"

He had glasses on. Not dark, slick, sexy sunglasses. Glasses. With wire frames and clear lenses. Not slick at all. Of course, they still looked amazing on him, but since when did Ryder need glasses (and since when would these be the ones he picked if he did)?

His eyebrows lowered, his expression shifting to what might have been annoyance, but she was too busy taking in the rest of him.

He was wearing a plaid button-down, a tie, and a heavy wool cardigan. With elbow patches. What was going on here?

He pushed the cup he had caught back into her free hand.

"What do you need, Vic? I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"Doing what?" she asked, biting back a smile. "Joining the Witness Protection Program?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Something like that." He scratched at his neck, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Listen, I don't want to be rude, but I really am busy."

She blinked.

“Oh. Okay. Sure. I just thought that we could ... You know what? Never mind. I should have called. Then I would have known not to come, right?” she said with a nervous laugh. She looked down at the cups in her hand. “Oh, but here. This was for you.”

She thrust the cup into his hand, turning on her heel and striding as confidently as she could toward the elevator. It made no sense that she felt hurt by this, but she sort of did. Lately no one had time for her.

“Vic.”

She paused, composed her features into what she hoped was an easy smile, and turned.

“Yes?”

He scratched his neck again. “I’m headed out somewhere ...”

“No, I got it. It’s fine, really.”

“No, what I mean is ...” He looked down at his coffee, running a finger over the edge of the plastic lid. Then he raised his gaze to meet her eyes. “Would you like to come with me?”

Yes! Or rather, sure, why not?

She shrugged.

“I guess I could do that.” She cleared her throat. “If it’s more convenient for you, of course. So we can discuss our plan for the engagement party.”

“I figured you’d already have a whole checklist for that.”

“Oh, I do—”

He grinned at her.

“... but we could go over it,” she added feebly, fighting her own smile. She took a sip of her coffee so she didn’t say anything else to embarrass herself.

“You’d better come in for a few before we head out.” He swung the door wide behind him.

“Oh, right, yes. Good thinking,” she said, eyeing his rather unusual ensemble.

She’d been so flustered she’d momentarily forgotten what he looked like right then, but if they were going out in public, they needed to be photo-ready at all times. That was the whole point.

Thank God he was paying more attention.

She stepped into his apartment. “Of course, you want to change before we head out.”

“Oh, I’m not going to change,” he said, running his eyes over her standard uniform designer suit as he shut the door. “But you are.”



“YOU’RE REALLY NOT GOING to tell me where we’re going?”

Ryder shrugged. “Where would the fun be in that?”

Vicky shook her head, tilting her head down so the faded brim of the baseball cap she was wearing hid her smile.

He had outfitted her in an oversized T-shirt (well, it probably clung to his muscular chest rather snugly, but on her, it was oversized). On the front, bold letters announced *My FUNNY T-shirt is in the wash*. He’d also given her an extra-warm hoodie, which she was swimming in and which smelled musky and masculine (and just like he always smelled, not that she would notice such a thing). Under those, he’d insisted she wear the yoga pants and sneakers she’d had in her gym bag. Her hair was in a high ponytail threaded through the back of the cap, and she was wearing her sunglasses. She had no idea where they were headed.

Ryder shifted his beat-up backpack (the contents of which he had also refused to divulge) from one shoulder to the other, grabbing onto the subway pole with his free hand.

Vicky hadn’t been on the subway in ... well, she wasn’t sure when she’d ridden the subway. She knew she’d taken the

Métro once or twice in Paris back when she'd spent her semester abroad there. Frankly, she'd always assumed she couldn't take New York public transportation without being recognized, given how often she appeared in the style pages or, occasionally, as recent events had demonstrated, the gossip columns. But so far this little excursion was disproving that theory.

And she was quite sure she'd never been on a train as crowded as this. When they'd first gotten on, she'd been sure they'd be recognized immediately. She'd been bracing herself for the dozen or more candid photos that would pop up online and trying to figure out how to spin their bizarre appearances. Costume party? Dare? At least they'd be being seen out together, so it wouldn't be a total disaster, but it wasn't ideal. She'd kicked herself for letting him talk her into going out like this.

But no one even gave them a second glance.

She looked up to see Ryder studying her. "See? It's all about context. And presentation." He nodded toward her very un-Victoria Ashby ensemble. "You look good in my T-shirt by the way."

Vicky felt warmth creeping up from her chest, over her neck. Before it could get to her face, she changed the subject.

"If you won't tell me, I'm going to guess. I bet you're taking me to ... a seminar on invertebrate biology."

"Uh ... no."

"A private club for IT professionals?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Are all your guesses going to be nerd-based?"

"With you in plaid and that tie? Yes." She paused, considering. "A sci-fi convention?"

He smirked. "If I were doing that, we'd be dressed as Klingons."

"Maybe you'd be dressed as a Klingon. I'd be Trill all the way."

He arched a brow. “Maybe I should have lent you my Borg shirt.”

“You *have* a Borg shirt?” She laughed.

“I am a man of many layers.”

She eyed him. He was joking, but she was beginning to realize that might be true.

Overhead, the loudspeaker squawked incomprehensibly, presumably announcing whatever was the next stop. She’d lost track, but they’d been traveling uptown. They must be pretty high up by now.

“That’s us,” Ryder said.

He reached for her hand, motioning toward the doors.

“Well, I guess I’ll find out the big secret soon enough,” she said, letting him lead her as they squeezed past the other passengers.

She felt him tense up, just for a second. “Yeah,” he said, without turning around.

Was he nervous? Should *she* be nervous?

She’d been joking around, but really, she had no idea what he was up to and this whole top-secret escapade *was* weird. Why *was* he dressed so strangely? Obviously, he didn’t want to be recognized. But why?

Ryder was notorious for being caught doing all kinds of scandalous things. Parties, women, once an incident of drag racing through downtown Madrid. What could he possibly be up to that he wanted to keep secret?

He pulled her along through the crowd on the subway platform and up the stairs. The air was cooler up here, a welcome reprieve from the stuffy subway, but it was another unseasonably warm day for February.

“Come on.” Ryder, still holding her hand, looked both ways before leading her across the street to a small park.

It consisted mostly of a basketball court with netless hoops and cracked pavement. A half-dozen teenage boys were

playing a loud but friendly game.

Ryder walked to a set of weathered benches and sat. He indicated for her to do the same.

She looked around, confused. “We’re ... stopping here?”

People bustled along on the sidewalks. An old woman out with her dog. A mom with a stroller and a toddler in tow. A guy carrying takeout food.

“Mmm-hmm,” Ryder answered. He leaned over and unzipped his bag, which he had set on the ground, pulled out a sketchbook and pencil, and started sketching.

Huh. So he *did* still draw. She was unexpectedly happy to see this was the case—even more touched to be let in on it. She leaned over to look at the page. He was working on a fantasy landscape, complete with a variety of mischievous-looking mythical creatures. The details were quite nuanced considering he was just working in pencil. But then he had always been a talented artist.

“Yo, Mr. R!” One of the kids had left the basketball court and was walking over to them, breathing heavily.

Ryder brightened. “James, what’s up?” He reached up to fist-bump the boy, a scrawny fourteen at most.

“Not much. You bring any charcoal today?”

“In the bag.” Ryder nodded. “There’s some oil pastels in there too.”

James dug around, pulling out supplies. “Ooh, nice. I tried these last time.”

“Let me know if you want me to show you some things you can do with them.”

“Yeah, okay.”

By now a couple of the other kids had come over. James pulled small sketchbooks out of the bag for each of them, and they divvied up the supplies. Ryder continued to focus on his sketch through his witness-protection disguise nerd glasses. Vicky, meanwhile, simply gaped.

“Who’s the lady, Mr. R?” one of the kids leaned in and whispered to Ryder, not quite quietly enough.

“She’s a friend of mine.”

“I’m gonna draw my cat,” said James.

“I’m gonna draw a bunch of stuff exploding,” said the loud whisperer.

“Can I draw your lady friend, Mr. R?” asked a gangly boy as he joined the others sitting on the ground.

Ryder paused, cocking his head to the side.

“I don’t know.” He turned to her. “Lady friend?”

She blinked. “Uh, yes, sure. Why not?”

Ryder gave her a little nod and went back to his sketch, the corner of his mouth curving up ever so slightly.

The boy pushed up his sleeves and started sketching her. She held her pose for him, but she didn’t take her eyes off Ryder.

He wasn’t what she expected.

NEW YORK MINUTE

Sorry, folks. No Ry-cky sightings today.

╰(´▽`)/

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“*N*oah Prince is engaged? To someone else? How can that be? He’s been with you for years!”

“No, Daddy, remember? We broke up.” Vicky pinched the bridge of her nose with one hand as she held the phone to her ear with the other. Maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned Noah’s upcoming nuptials. She knew he didn’t pay close attention to society news these days, but she’d been afraid word would seep down to Florida eventually and had wanted to get ahead of it. It was clear, however, from her father’s reaction that what rated as earth-shattering news in Manhattan didn’t even register in his circle of wealthy, semiretired, golf-playing septuagenarians.

Which made it even less likely he could possibly have gotten wind of her “relationship” with Ryder. Something she was definitely not going to bring up now. She counted her blessings. There was something to be said for a man who had his finger on the pulse of little more than a dry martini these days.

Her father cleared his throat awkwardly. “Oh, yes, that’s right. Well, are you okay with this, Pumpkin?”

“I’m fine, Daddy.”

“I still don’t see why you need to attend the engagement party.”

“Noah is still my business partner. And the family are still dear friends.” She knew he wouldn’t argue with that. After all, Cheryl had been her mother’s best friend. Not only that, but

for Lawrence Ashby, semiretired meant he still retained the reins of his own multibillion-dollar company. He knew full well the importance of maintaining good relationships with powerful business connections.

“Nevertheless,” he said firmly after a pause, “you ought to protect your heart, Pumpkin.”

She felt a rush of warmth for him. She knew it wasn’t easy for him to show affection, to talk to her about her feelings. But ever since they had lost her mom, when it really mattered, he had tried. And she loved him for it.

She wanted to let him know she really was going to be all right. It was still too early, and she was too unsure about Davis to make any promises, but she could hint at it, she supposed.

“Actually ... there is someone. We’re not exactly seeing each other, but I think we might be soon.”

“Oh?” Her dad sounded excited. But then he tempered his tone. “But does he make you happy, Pumpkin?”

Strangely, the memory of Ryder trying to coax her into the fountain at Lincoln Center popped into her head. But she brushed it away.

She thought, instead, of the text Davis had sent her overnight. True, it had arrived at four in the morning since he’d been somewhere over the Pacific when he sent it. And it had been only a few lines, but it had been there to greet her when she woke up. And anyway, the point was he had been thinking about her.

“Yes, Daddy. I think he does. Or he will,” she amended. After a moment of reflection, she added, “We suit each other.”

“Hmm.” Her father grunted noncommittally. “And would I like him?”

She smiled to herself, thinking of Davis, his refined manner, the respect he commanded, his quiet charm. “I think you would, Daddy.”

“Well, all right, then. I still think you’re crazy to be attending this evening, but I won’t keep you. I know you’ll be

wanting to do your hair and pick just the right jewelry and whatnot as you ladies do.”

Vicky remembered her mother confiding in her that her dad had no sense of what went into meeting the expectations of being a society woman. After all, all he needed to do to attend a formal event was shave and throw on a suit. She bit back a smile. “Something like that. I’ll talk to you soon, Daddy.”

“Bye bye, Pumpkin.”

She hung up the phone and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Right. Well, the press would be there along with half of New York’s elite—the people whose respect she’d need if she truly wanted to earn a name for herself. Time to choose just the right jewelry and whatnot.



TWO HOURS LATER, Vicky entered the ballroom at the Prince Plaza Midtown. She wore an elegant gown in emerald satin, her hair smoothed into a neat chignon, makeup subtle and classic. Schooling her features into a pleasant smile, she was, she knew, the picture of graciousness and poise. On the outside. On the inside, she felt like she might throw up.

What she was nervous about she wasn’t sure. That the media would portray her as the poor jilted ex, putting up a brave front as she watched Noah get everything she’d ever wanted while she stood by with nothing? That she’d actually *be* the poor, jilted ex putting up a brave front as she watched Noah get everything she’d ever wanted while she stood by with ... well, not nothing, but certainly less than she’d hoped for herself.

So far, she reminded herself. Less than she’d hoped so far. She and Davis were *nearly* an item. And she wasn’t here alone, she had Ryder.

An ease washed over her at the thought of him before she caught herself. He wasn’t her support system. He certainly wasn’t her boyfriend. He was a liability she’d made the best

of. In fact, *that* had to be where her nerves were coming from. Fear that Ryder would screw things up for her tonight. Somehow make her situation—both the one he'd created with that kiss and the one Noah had inadvertently placed her in by falling in love with someone else—worse.

She didn't think Ryder would do anything intentionally. They had forged that much of a friendship in the last few weeks. It was the unintentional she had to watch out for.

Exactly why, she reminded herself, she had sent him her checklist for tonight.

She scanned the crowd of well-dressed celebrants, sipping drinks and gossiping around the elegantly decorated ballroom until she found him, leaning against the wall on the far side of the room. Hair slicked neatly back—check. Well-tailored suit in subdued navy with a crisp, white shirt—check. Tasteful tie and matching pocket square—check. Clean shave, sipping wine, not throwing back hard liquor, keeping his distance from Noah so as not to antagonize his brother and cause a scene—check, check, check.

He had followed her instructions to the letter. And he looked good, if not quite himself. So why did her pulse kick up as she looked at him?

“Oh!” Vicky nearly fell off her heels as something solid slammed into her.

“Oh God, I'm sorry! Are you okay?” gasped Ivy in a rush. She was impeccably dressed in a sleek black Dior gown, but her face was flushed, and her blue eyes were wide.

“Ivy, are you all right?”

The other woman put a hand to her chest and took a deliberately slow breath. “Yeah, yes, yeah. Sure. Don't I look all right?”

“You look ...”

“Harried? Stressed? Like someone asked me to pull together the engagement party of the decade in less than two weeks?”

Vicky looked around the room again. It was perfect. From the hors d'oeuvres to the flower arrangements to the crystal. "You've done an incredible job."

Ivy folded her arms and surveyed it herself.

"I did, didn't I?" She smiled with satisfaction. "Now I get to plan the wedding of the decade in under two months. Oh God, they're circulating the stuffed shrimp only on the left half of the ballroom. Would you excuse me?"

She was halfway to the kitchen before Vicky could answer. Poor Ivy.

She looked around the ballroom again, spotting several couples she and Noah had frequently seen socially when they were together. Poor her. She took a deep breath. Okay. She could do this. Right?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ryder swirled his wine in his glass. He was pacing himself, as per Vicky's instructions. Not that it mattered. He could see the various Prince friends, relations, and business connections whispering about him when they thought he wasn't looking. Or maybe they just didn't care if he was looking.

Yeah, that's right, Mrs. Prescott, I'd have bet my inheritance I'd never show up at something like this too.

He'd thought about raising his glass to one or two of the more shameless gossips across the room, but he was being a good boy.

How in the hell had he let himself get talked into this?

In fairness, this was an unprecedented event. Prince Charming was only going to get married once (Ryder could only hope). Mom might have insisted on his attendance anyway.

But at least he could have done it with flair. Rode in on a motorcycle or showed up with a coked-up model on his arm or something. Now he didn't even *want* to cause a scene. Because Vicky would be upset, and for some stupid reason, he didn't want to upset her.

He shook his head. "Pff." He downed the rest of his wine.

But when he looked up to find somewhere to deposit the empty glass, there she was. She was a hundred feet away, on the other side of the ballroom, but she was looking right at him.

And it took his breath away.

Oh, she looked gorgeous. Elegant. She was wearing a silky number in vivid green that skimmed her curves and fluttered around her ankles in a way that looked like it had been designed just for her. It probably had been. She looked incredible, but that wasn't it.

In fact, he thought as she moved through the crowd straight for him, he'd seen her in sweats and a baseball cap and had liked her just as much that way. Maybe more so.

She reached him, leaning in to kiss his cheek. She pulled back, and he missed her closeness immediately.

Maybe that was it. He had seen a version of her others hadn't. One she was, inexplicably, trusting him with it seemed. At the park. At the fountain. Even now, he realized, as she took his hand and looked into his eyes.

"Hi," she breathed. "Don't leave me alone tonight, okay?"

Many, *many* wicked thoughts flashed through his mind at that, but he simply squeezed her hand, and said, "What, and leave you to these wolves? Never."

She smiled, a shy, genuine smile, and it shone so brightly everything else faded into the shadows.

"Tch, Victoria," said a voice beside them. "It's so brave of you, darling, to come."

The smile faded into something rigid and forced, and for a second, he wanted to punch the owner of the voice. But a second later, he recognized it as belonging to his seventy-year-old Aunt Mable, so instead, he turned to her and said, "Don't you look lovely this evening? And how is Uncle Fred?"

The old prune startled as if she hadn't noticed him there. "Ryder. Hello. You're looking ..." She let her eyes glide up and down his frame but didn't finish her sentence. She turned back to Vic, hand to her chest. "Oh, dear. I had hoped it was the papers up to more of their nonsense." She leaned in, though she didn't bother to lower her voice. "I know this business with Noah is upsetting, but you deserve more, darling."

Vicky opened her mouth to say something, but Mable just patted her cheek and walked away, tutting.

“Wine?” he asked as they watched her go.

“Please.”



RYDER WAS WATCHING HER. He was probably trying to be subtle about it, but subtle wasn't his strong suit. She could tell he was trying to protect her. It was really rather adorable.

“I'm *fine*,” she told him through a smile as they navigated around the room. She nodded to an older gentleman she knew to be one of Warren's Princeton friends.

“Yes, but are you really?” Ryder gave the man an insincere smile. “Clive.”

“Yes, really.” Being fine was what was required in order to get through this with her dignity intact, and so she was damn well going to be fine.

They had been circulating for over an hour, smiling and nodding through a stream of pleasantries with the various party guests. They had said hello to Cheryl and Warren. Cheryl had been warm as always, Warren stiff but cordial. They had offered their congratulations (again) to the happy couple, and that had gone just fine really. Awkward for Vicky, of course, but she got the sense it was uncomfortable for Sabrina as well, and she couldn't help but feel for her. Being with a Prince, this kind of attention. It was a *lot*, even without his ex still hovering in the periphery.

There had been photos (photographers were circling to capture the moment both for posterity and the society pages), there had been well wishes, and there had been many, many pitying looks.

“It is very good to see you looking so ...” Marjory Blackwell, a major the Prince Foundation donor, paused, looking her over as she searched for the right word. “Well, you've made it here. That's something all by itself, isn't it?”

Vicky gave a strained smile she hoped didn't look strained. "Thank you, Marjory. It's lovely to see you."

After the woman had moved away, Ryder turned to Vicky again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

And she was. Yes, a lot of people were offering her more sympathy than she felt was truly necessary. The consensus seemed to be that if she thought Noah marrying someone else *wasn't* a devastating loss for her, she ought to rethink that.

But she could handle it. She could hold her head high. Accept their well-meaning condolences gracefully.

What was really grating on her—

"Ryder Prince! I never thought I'd see the day," laughed a middle-aged man with a comb-over as he passed.

—was that.

She was a poor thing to be pitied, but Ryder was, apparently, just there to be the butt of an unending series of weak and unoriginal cruel jokes.

She stole a glance at him. His jaw ticked, but he said nothing.

"Victoria!" Anastasia Cartwright gushed. The young socialite leaned in to kiss the air next to Vicky's cheek. "So marvelous to see you out and about!" She slid her gaze in Ryder's direction and added in a very audible whisper, "Do you need an intervention, Vicky dear?"

What was she supposed to say to that?

Ryder nodded. "Anastasia."

The sleek blonde looked at him for a moment, opening her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it again. She hooked her arm through Vicky's and led her a few steps away, casting a glance back in his direction. She grinned conspiratorially. "What is it? Revenge on Prince Charming for dumping you? Or is the Dark Prince simply as yummy as he looks?"

The other woman winked at her, and Vicky felt her last nerve snap.

Ryder had been nothing but—well, not *sweet* to her per se—but generous and decent to her. And none of these people seemed to be able to afford him basic respect.

“You know what, Anastasia,” said Vicky, vaguely aware that her voice had risen to the point where it could be heard above the general din of the ballroom, “I’ve had just about enough—”

“Shrimp? I agree.” Ryder swooped in, smiling smoothly at Anastasia as well as the various party guests who had turned to see what the commotion was about. “Let’s go see if we can’t find some brie and crackers or maybe some cocktail wieners.”

He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her away, leaving Anastasia and the rest of their audience behind to gape. And—she was sure—gossip about what exactly had gotten into her.

Just the thought made her want to turn on her heel and give her a piece of her mind.

“Whoa there, princess.” Firm hands wrapped around her waist and redirected her back on her original path.

Huh. Apparently, she had *actually* turned on her heel.

“Come here.” He steered her along quickly, glancing around furtively. “There’s something I want to show you, right ... here.”

Without warning, he yanked her through a doorway she hadn’t even noticed and into a side hall. It was empty, but the sound of the kitchen staff scurrying around, clashing dishes together and calling instructions to each other drifted down from one of the hallways that branched off this one.

Ryder threw a look back into the ballroom. She followed his gaze, but no one there seemed to be looking their way. The exit they had taken was partially concealed by a decorative curtain. She breathed a sigh of relief, slumping against the wall before becoming dimly aware that Ryder was breathing heavily. And standing very, very close.

He looked up into her eyes. And laughed.

“Sorry, I thought I better get you out of there before you said something you—or Page Six—couldn’t take back.”

She blinked, her eyes not leaving his. “Well, I’m sorry. But if I had to hear one more person talking about you like you’re ___”

“I know.” His expression softened, but his smile lingered. “And don’t think I don’t appreciate it. But there’s no need for you to sully your good name with my scandalous one. Well, any more than you already have. I didn’t want you to say something you’d regret.”

“I wouldn’t have regretted it.”

He searched her eyes for a long moment. They were still standing close, her back against the wall, Ryder leaning in, faces inches from each other. Finally, he spoke. “You want to get out of here?”

Yes.

Wait, no!

“We can’t just leave.”

“Why not?”

She arched a brow. “Because I have no desire for tomorrow’s headline to be all about how I’m so pathetic I had to sneak out of here early. And the exits are all swimming with press.”

“Hmm. Good point. Okay, then. We won’t use the exits.”

And with that, he grabbed her hand and took off down the hall.

“Ryder!” she hissed as she stumbled along behind him, wondering what on Earth he could possibly be up to.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“*A*re you sure no one saw us?” Vic asked as they climbed the metal stairs, the clicking of her heels echoing off the cinder blocks in the small space.

He wasn’t sure. You could never be completely sure. But in his years as a paparazzi magnet, he’d gotten pretty good at drawing attention when he wanted it and slipping away when he didn’t.

He glanced back over her shoulder.

“I think we’re good.”

He squeezed her hand, then threw open the door.

“Oh *wow*.”

Vic walked out slowly, taking it all in. New York from the rooftop of the Prince Plaza Midtown was something to behold. Sure there were bars and restaurants that let you have this view, but there was nothing like standing in dark solitude on a plain, empty roof like this one, taking in the glimmering magic stretching out into the blackness as far as the eye could see.

The night was crisp and cold, but up here, miles away, it seemed, from the crowded ballroom below, Ryder felt free. Judging by the awestruck look on Vicky’s face, she felt it too.

She stepped up to the half wall that ran along the roof’s edge, peering down at the lights of 5th Avenue. The wind picked up, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

“Are you cold?” He stepped up beside her. “We can go back in.”

“No. No, this is amazing.”

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She threw him a wry look.

“What?” He grinned. “I’m not a complete jerk.”

She studied him. They were standing close, his arm still draped around her shoulders, and the silence quickly became unnerving.

“No,” she said finally. “No, you’re not.”

Well, damn. He didn’t have a response for that, snappy or otherwise, so he just turned and looked out over the city. She turned, too, so they were standing shoulder to shoulder.

“How do you do it?” she asked. “How do you let them be so awful to you and not let it get to you?”

He shrugged. “Lots of practice.”

She shook her head.

“I think maybe I get it now. What it’s like to be on the outside of all this.” She gestured vaguely toward the door that led back into the hotel. “Maybe a little of why you hate it so much.”

He kept his face to the street but slid his eyes over to watch her from the side. Her face was rosy from the cold, lit in the glow of the city. Her breath came out in delicate clouds, drifting up into the sky.

He didn’t hate all of it.

But he didn’t say that. Instead, he shook his head and snorted out a laugh. “Honey, you don’t know the half of it.”

Suddenly her hand was on his arm, warm and firm. She turned him to face her. “Thank you.” She slid her hand down and wrapped her fingers around his. “Thanks for getting me out of there. And thanks for coming in the first place. I know you didn’t want to.”

“Eh, it wasn’t so bad.” He looked into her wide eyes. God, he could get lost in them. “My mom told me she was pleased I

made the effort. Which, you know, is the first time she's been pleased with me in ..."

He meant it to be flip, but suddenly his throat was tightening. He looked down at his shoes. "Well, in a long time," he finished quietly. And Jesus Christ, his voice came out raspy and choked.

He didn't look up, but he could feel Vic's eyes on him. Hell, she was standing so close he could feel the heat coming off her body, but she didn't move.

Then she did.

Her hand grazed his jaw, barely touching him as she gently turned his face up to hers. Her eyes searched his for a heartbeat, then two.

And then her mouth was on his.

Her soft lips pressed against his, dazing his senses. Time froze, and everything around them slipped away. And then he was grabbing her by the lapels of his jacket, pulling her close and closer still. Damn, he couldn't get close enough.

He pressed her mouth open, backed her against the wall looking out over the city.

Vicky was kissing him. *She* was kissing *him*.

This wasn't like the alley where he'd kissed her to get a rise out of her. Or like the bathroom where she'd panicked their lie would be discovered.

This was intense. Intimate. Real.

This was happening. And he didn't know how much he'd wanted it to until it had.

But now that he knew? There was no going back.

He slid an arm under the jacket, circling her waist, and dropped his head to place a kiss just behind her ear.

She let out a little moan.

Good. Lord.

Could they get to a room without having to go through the lobby, he wondered. Maybe he could just jimmy a lock.

“Ryder,” Vic whispered, all husky.

He pulled back. Took a shaky breath. She was going to tell him to stop. Of course, she was. He should never have started. Should have stopped the kiss as soon as it began. She was mixed up, overwhelmed by this party and every other stupid thing she’d been put through lately. That was all. She didn’t want this. What was he thinking?

But then she reached her hand around to the back of his neck, pulling him to her with such force he nearly lost his balance, stumbling into her, she slid her mouth over his, breathed him in. “Oh, Ryder,” she gasped.

She *wasn’t* going to ask him to stop. She was right there with him.

That was all the encouragement he needed.

He let out a low growl, pressing her into the wall behind her.

She wrapped a leg around his, pulling him closer still, and —

Lights flashed.

Cameras.

NEW YORK MINUTE

OooOooOooh. La. La.

Do we have a society scoop for you!

Sure there was an engagement party for the city's formerly most eligible bachelor and yummiest Boy Scout ever, Noah Prince.

Designer gowns, everyone who's anyone, blah, blah, blah.

Not that it wasn't lovely and all that, but the real excitement was approximately forty stories *above* the main event, on the roof ...

No surprise: after a brief flirtation with decency, Ryder Prince is back to his old tricks, sneaking out of his own brother's engagement party. Big surprise: he didn't do this behind poor Vicky Ashby's back, he did it right in front of her face. Approximately zero millimeters in front of her face, because *she* was the lady in question.

On the one hand, at least he wasn't skipping out on Vicky already. On the other hand, WTH, Vicky? We get it if it's tough to see Noah with another woman, but pull yourself together! Slinking away for a little sumpin' sumpin' in the middle of a gala event? This isn't like you.

Has the bad-boy billionaire been a bad influence on sweet Vicky Ashby? Say it isn't so!

(Scroll down for highly incriminating photos below ...)

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“*W*hat the hell were you thinking?” Vicky’s father’s voice came through slightly distorted as he shouted down the line.

She tipped her head to the ceiling and tried to center herself. She had been up half the night refreshing the gossip pages, trying to assess the damage. The photos were *bad*. Nearly indecent. The comments weren’t any better. She wasn’t sure she had the capacity for this conversation right now.

When she didn’t respond, he continued. “Do you have any idea how this looks?”

Of course, she did. She wasn’t an idiot. “Yes, Daddy, I—”

“You know, you’re an Ashby. What you do reflects on me and Ashby Industries. Even if you do have your own career.”

“I know, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

He sighed deeply. “Pumpkin, if you want people to take you seriously, you have to stay away from scandal.”

“You’re right.” Maybe she should tell him that’s what she’d been *trying* to do. But obviously, she’d screwed that up, so—

“Being caught in a tryst isn’t *so* bad. But there are right ways and wrong ways to handle these things.”

“Like not doing them in the middle of your ex-boyfriend and current business partner’s engagement celebration?” She smiled in spite of herself, but there was no smile in her dad’s voice when he spoke again.

“Like not doing them with men like Ryder Prince.”

Any trace of amusement in her expression dropped flat.

“Because he’s Noah’s brother, you mean?”

“Because he’s Ryder Prince for God’s sake! Do you know what kind of reputation that hooligan has?!”

The kind he doesn’t deserve, she thought.

She gritted her teeth. “He’s not a hooligan, Daddy.”

“He’s *not* good for your reputation, Victoria. And he’s not good for *you*.”

Something in her wanted to bite back and argue. But she couldn’t disagree, not about the reputation. Not when she’d allowed herself to be caught in a kiss so steamy it made the original one—the scandal she’d been trying to erase—look like nothing. And being bad for her reputation—especially right now, while she was trying to establish herself in her own right, not just as Noah Prince’s (ex) girlfriend—well, bad for her reputation *was* bad for her.

“Listen, Daddy, I should go. I’m having lunch with Cheryl Prince in a little while.”

She had made the date two days ago, back when she thought it would solidify her position with the family, not remind Noah and Ryder’s mom of what an embarrassment she was.

There was a long pause, during which she assumed her father was debating telling her what a disaster seeing Cheryl would likely be right now or delineating Ryder’s many unsavory acts as evidence she ought to get the hell out of her (fake) relationship.

She didn’t have the patience for either.

Fortunately, after a moment, the elder Ashby seemed to think better of saying anything more. “All right, Pumpkin. I’ll talk to you later.”

Vicky dropped onto her sofa, setting the phone on the coffee table. She blew out a breath.

What a mess.

She'd had a plan. A perfectly good plan.

And it had all gone to hell.

Maybe you should've thought about that before you mauled Ryder on the roof last night.

Ya think? She banished the thought. It didn't matter. The damage was done, and anyway, she hadn't been thinking at all last night, clearly, or none of this ever would have happened.

So much for her carefully crafted plan to turn herself and Ryder into a boring story that faded into the background and was eventually forgotten. Her father was right. This didn't look good.

New York wasn't going to forget the guest of honor's brother and ex sneaking off to make out like a couple of oversexed teenagers.

Things had been going so well. Why had she done it?

The memory of Ryder's strong, muscled arms wrapped around her, his masculine scent filling her senses came into her mind, and she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a little scream to banish it.

Okay, maybe she had an idea of what the appeal had been, but what she really didn't understand was why she'd given into it. It must have been the strain of playing the gracious friend to Noah's whirlwind romance. And knowing that while he was finding his happily ever after, she was still alone.

If Davis had been more available, maybe she wouldn't have felt so—

Davis.

Given that he'd missed the other New York gossip headlines, he might not have seen this one either. But this one was circulating much more widely, given the salaciousness of both the photo and the timing of the ... interlude. He could actually have seen it. Oh God.

She closed her eyes, said a little prayer, and dialed her (almost) boyfriend.

“Hello, Victoria. Lovely to hear from you. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

There wasn’t a hint of anything other than pleasantness in his tone, and Vicky breathed a sigh of relief.

“No reason, just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Well, isn’t that nice? Hang on a second.” His voice was muffled as he said something to someone about files, clearly covering the phone. “Sorry about that.”

“Are you at work already?” It wasn’t even 7:30 in the morning on the West Coast.

“I wanted to get a jump on my notes before the shareholder’s meeting later today.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Well, I won’t keep you.”

“Call you this weekend?”

“Sur—”

“Oh, wait, I’m on a working retreat through Tuesday.”

“Oh. Great. Well, have fun.”

“Mmm-hmm, you too,” he said distractedly, and the line went dead.

He hadn’t seen the photos. He was as stable and reliable as always, diligently exercising that work ethic she found so attractive. The call ought to have made her feel better, ought to have grounded her. Instead, she felt more lost than ever.

But she didn’t have any time to think about that. She had to get ready to go have lunch with Cheryl, a.k.a. the woman whose son’s engagement party she had ruined with her other son.



RYDER ROLLED over and stretched his arm lazily up onto his pillow. Bright sunlight streamed into his bedroom. He smiled to himself.

Vicky had kissed him. She had really *kissed* him.

Sure, that goddamn photographer had interrupted them, but that wasn't the point.

He wanted to do something for her. Dinner! He would cook her dinner.

He knew whatever pictures that jackass had gotten were probably all over the internet by now and that she would be worried about it, given the timing and how private the moment had been. But really, how much did it matter in the scheme of things? She'd *wanted* a publicized relationship with him. She'd have it in spades now.

And he couldn't wait to see her. To think he'd actually been annoyed at the idea of them pretending to be involved.

He laughed, feeling strangely light. Lighter than he had in years.

He wondered if she liked carbonara ...

CHAPTER TWENTY

By the time Vicky was in the back of the town car, riding to Tavern on the Green, she had made up her mind what she was going to do. It was simple really. In business, it made no sense to keep investing in a deal that wasn't returning a profit. This was no different.

The cost of her fake relationship with Ryder was exceeding the rewards, and it was time to cut her losses. She would apologize profusely to Cheryl for the photo and her behavior at the engagement party, let her know it wasn't working out with Ryder, and then go see Ryder and put an end to their deal.

He'd be relieved to be released from further obligation. When she thought about it, she wasn't even really sure why he'd gone along with the charade as long as he had.

It was sweet of him really. Even if it had all gone to hell in the end. She shook her head, trying to clear it. This had been a bad idea from the start, plain and simple. Now she was going to fix it.

She wasn't sure there was a way to separate herself from Ryder without people thinking he had just been, well, *too Ryder* for her. Not after those photos. Even Cheryl and Warren would likely think the same.

She doubted Ryder would care, though. He seemed to relish his bad-boy reputation. Still, the idea of throwing him under the bus made her feel a little queasy. He might be a "bad

boy,” but he was a *good guy*. She’d known that all along, and the last few weeks had only solidified it for her.

But it was like his basic decency was his little secret. He was all too happy to let people think whatever bad things they thought about him. He cultivated that image even.

Not with her, though.

Somehow, he had let her see the real him. Why was she special? Why did he trust her? And why did she feel like she was betraying him?

She closed her eyes. No. She wasn’t betraying him at all. He hadn’t even wanted to do this whole fake relationship thing. He’d be ecstatic to be done with it. To be free to skip out on all the wedding and family events if he wanted to. Not to have to rein himself in for her sake.

The car arrived outside the restaurant, and she took a deep breath. Here she went.



“VICTORIA!” Cheryl positively beamed as she stood and waved from the table. This was not the reception Vicky had been expecting. So much so that she turned and looked around, making sure the exuberant greeting was directed at her, even though it obviously was.

Okay, then. She’d really thought the older woman would have been upset, if not about her and Ryder’s less-than-seemly behavior, then about the media fiasco that had ensued. She’d have been too kind to show it directly, of course. Especially to her, given everything they’d been through together, from losing her mom to the years she’d spent with Noah. Cheryl was basically a surrogate mother to her.

But the woman was practically giddy. There was no way her bubbly attitude was hiding an undercurrent of displeasure or even disappointment.

Which was odd.

She arrived at the table, and Cheryl pulled her close, planting a kiss on each cheek before pulling back to look at her.

“Vicky, darling, did you sleep well? You look ... tense.”

Maybe the strain of everything was getting to Cheryl. Vicky closed her eyes and made herself smile. “I’m fine, thank you. And yourself?”

“Oh, fantastic!”

No point in questioning it, Vicky finally decided. The other woman’s good mood would just make everything she had to say easier. Wouldn’t it?

First things first.

“Cheryl,” Vicky began as they took their seats. She felt her face flame. “I am *so* sorry about the—” Obscene photos of me and your son? Incredibly poor judgment I demonstrated? My forever marring what should have been a treasured family memory? She cleared her throat. “Press coverage.”

More than anything, she didn’t want to damage her relationship with the older woman.

Cheryl waved a dismissive hand, brushing the idea aside. “Don’t worry about it, dear.”

“That’s ... more than nice of you. But we both know it was —”

“Young love.”

Vicky choked on literal air.

She coughed repeatedly. Cheryl knit her brows in concern, waving a waiter over to fill Vicky’s water glass. She handed it to her, and Vicky took a sip, her hacking eventually subsiding. She was vaguely aware that people around them were turning to look, but she was more concerned with the woman in front of her who was watching her with a knowing smile.

“I remember what it was like to be so smitten with someone you couldn’t keep your hands off them.”

“I ...” *Smitten*. Oh, Ryder was going to get a kick out of this. If she made it through the lunch to tell him about it, that was. “Cheryl, I don’t really think we’re ...”

Cheryl put her hand on Vicky’s. “It’s all right, darling. I wouldn’t have expected the two of you either, but frankly, I’m over the moon about it. I’ve missed you since you and Noah went your separate ways. I know we still see each other, but it hasn’t been the same. And Ryder ... Well, I can’t tell you how long and hard I’ve hoped for someone to come into his life and give him the love he deserves. And that it’s *you*, Victoria. I can’t even express ...” She trailed off as her eyes became glassy. She pulled a handkerchief from her handbag and dabbed daintily at the corners.

What in the name of all that was holy was Vicky supposed to do now?

Learning she and Ryder weren’t together was going to crush Cheryl.

She drew a deep breath. This just made it harder, but it had to be done. Unless she and Ryder were prepared to keep fake seeing each other indefinitely, letting it continue would only make things worse in the end. And while Cheryl was swept up in some romantic fantasy about their relationship, she could guarantee that wasn’t the case for the rest of the world or even the rest of the family.

Her chest felt tight. She was about to hurt a dear, sweet friend. And what was worse, the entire situation was all her fault.

“Cheryl, things aren’t working ou—”

“There you are!”

Cheryl had sprung to her feet and was now greeting someone Vicky couldn’t quite see behind her—

“Have a seat! We’ve just gotten here.”

—Oh good God. It was Sabrina. Noah’s fiancée.

The petite blonde waved shyly. “Hello, Victoria. It’s nice to see you again.”

“It’s . . . I . . . hello!” she managed to stammer out.

Her confusion must have read on her face, because Sabrina blushed and looked at Cheryl, who gave a small apologetic smile. “I thought it might be awkward if I told Victoria I had invited you along.”

As opposed to just having her show up? So much less awkward.

Sabrina gave an uncomfortable giggle. “Oh.”

Right. Vicky needed to say something. *Now*. Fortunately, her years of social graces kicked in. “Well, what a pleasant surprise! It will be so nice for the two of us to have a chance to get to know each other better. Please”—she held out a hand—“join us.”

Sabrina visibly relaxed, which made Vicky relax, at least a little. The two of them sank into their seats.

They smiled at each other for a moment before they both seemed to realize simultaneously that Cheryl had remained standing. They turned to her in unison.

“Well,” she said theatrically, not even bothering to suppress the huge grin on her face, “I think perhaps it would be better if I gave you two a little time alone together.”

Vicky dimly registered the deer-in-headlights look on Sabrina’s face through her own alarm.

“Cheryl, no, please. We’d love to have your company.”

“Mmm-mmm, yes,” Sabrina squeezed out.

“Nonsense. You don’t need an old lady like me hanging around.”

Cheryl was turning fifty-nine next week and was hardly an old lady. “Don’t be silly. Stay.” The note of panic in Vicky’s voice was far more obvious than she would have liked, but considering how this day was going, she considered herself lucky to be retaining any sense of poise.

“Victoria.” The older woman fixed her with a warm, motherly gaze that made Vicky’s heart ache for just a second.

“Take the time to get to know each other. You’re both lovely young women. I hope you can become friends.”

Vicky choked back the rush of anxiety, of loneliness, of missing her own mom and gave a stiff nod. She knew Cheryl only had her best interests at heart. She was beyond grateful to have her in her life. She didn’t want to disappoint her. She’d lost her mom. She’d lost Noah, at least the way she’d once had him. She couldn’t stand the thought of losing her too.

Besides, she was right. With Vicky and Noah still working together and, she hoped, eventually putting the awkwardness behind them for good and becoming true friends, she and Sabrina ought to forge as comfortable a relationship as they could.

Cheryl patted her on the shoulder. “Atta girl. You’ll see.” She took her hand in one hand and Sabrina’s in the other. “You two need to be on each other’s side.” She leaned forward, and whispered conspiratorially, “Especially since you might end up sisters-in-law one day.”

She winked, then grabbed her bag, and practically skipped away.

Vicky blinked. She stared after her.

What the hell was that?

“In Cheryl’s defense, I don’t think she has the slightest idea how awkward she just made it.” Vicky turned to see Sabrina giving her a tiny quirk of a smile.

They both burst out laughing.

Sabrina wrinkled up her nose. “You want to order some wine?”

Okay, she had to admit, she did kind of like Sabrina.

“Please.”

They laughed again. Sabrina flagged down the waiter, they ordered their drinks and entrées, and then they were alone again.

In the back of her mind, it was nagging at Vicky that she hadn't been able to tell Cheryl she and Ryder weren't going to continue seeing each other. Considering how invested his mother seemed to be in their relationship, though, maybe it was better to let it stretch out just a little longer.

Ugh. She didn't know.

In the meantime, she had more immediate business to attend to.

"Sabrina, I'm ... I'm so sorry about the scene we caused at your party."

"Please, I love a little drama. Forget it." She looked down at her lap. "*I should be apologizing to you.*"

Vicky's mouth dropped open. How could she even think that? "For what?"

The other woman looked up, staring incredulously into her eyes. "Um, for ruining your whole relationship."

"Oh. That." They both smiled. She supposed it was absurd she'd forgotten it, but ... "We weren't right for each other. You didn't ruin anything."

Sabrina winced comically. "Really?"

"Really. As a matter of fact, I think you're really great for him. He needed to loosen up."

"He is a little uptight, isn't he?"

"Have you heard the story about how he wore a suit to my eighteenth birthday party ... at the beach?"

"Oh my God, no!"

"Oh, yes. I'd show you pictures, but I'm pretty sure he deleted and/or burned them all."

"Aww. That's adorable. It's funny, isn't it? Noah and Ryder are so different. I mean, I haven't had much chance to get to know Ryder, but he definitely doesn't strike me as the uptight type."

Vicky thought of him back at Lincoln Center, trying to convince her to “frolic” in the fountain with her. She smiled.

“That’s for sure.”

Sabrina studied her. “He’s good for you,” she said after a moment. Was he? Maybe he was in a way. “Maybe it’s better if we don’t end up with people too much like us.”

She flashed on Davis. A lot like her. But no, she was sure, the right sort of person—the right *person* for her. A man like Ryder was fun to be with, there was no denying that. But he was not who she would—or should—end up with.

Sabrina was watching her with a knowing smile on her face. And after everything Cheryl had said—okay, Vicky needed to put a stop to whatever was going on in Sabrina’s adorable blond head.

“Listen, despite what Cheryl may be hoping for Ryder and I aren’t ... well, we’re not a permanent thing.”

Sabrina shrugged, still smiling. “If you say so. From what Noah says, this is the longest Ryder’s stuck around in ages. You must be doing something right.”

If coercion can be considered something right.

“Maybe.”

The waiter arrived with their wine. Vicky took a healthy slug.

“Speaking of the brothers Prince,” Sabrina said, “there’s something I want to ask you ...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“*W*e’re in the damn wedding!”

Victoria burst past him into the apartment the minute he opened the door. She was practically hyperventilating.

“What?”

She whirled on him, face red, eyes wide. “We are in. The. Wedding. Your mother ambushed me at lunch—and I was actually fine with that—mostly she just wanted me and Sabrina to get to know each other—and that was going okay—Sabrina’s really a lovely person, and I’m glad she and Noah found each other, and maybe she and I can even be friends, but that’s not the point because *then* she told me they want us to be in the wedding.”

She stopped to catch her breath as Ryder absorbed as much of what she’d just said as he could manage. He was surprised, that was for sure.

“Noah wants me to be in his wedding?”

If you had asked him, he would have told you he couldn’t care less what Noah wanted, but the truth was a small part of him, buried deep inside, felt oddly warmed at this news.

“Not at all,” said Vicky matter-of-factly.

Oh. Right. Of course not.

“But your mom,” she continued, “is deeply invested in the idea. And Sabrina convinced Noah it was important for him to

mend fences with you, especially if he wants me in his life. You know, because we're an *item* and all."

Ryder bit back the comment he wanted to make about Noah not deserving her in his life.

Vicky had been with Noah for years. Much as it nauseated him to think about, she had cared about him. *Loved* him. Having to stand by—literally stand by, there at the altar—while he married someone else would be impossibly hard for her. He could do this. He could do this for her.

He stepped close, taking both her hands in his, and looked into her eyes.

"It's okay, Vic. We'll deal with it. And what, the wedding's at the theater in the park, right? No roofs for us to get caught on," he said with a playful smile.

"You don't get it. Now we can't break up."

Logically, he knew the end of their arrangement was coming. He knew *exactly* when it was coming because Vic had made a written plan.

So why did her mentioning it feel like a blow to his solar plexus?

"I thought that wasn't happening until after Mom's birthday party?"

She looked down. "I was going to talk to you about it. After the whole photo fiasco, I thought the best thing to do was just take the loss and move on. But now that doesn't seem like an option."

Photo fiasco. What had felt meaningful and important to him had been a *fiasco* to her. And the worst part was he *knew* better than to let himself care about what other people thought. To stake his own contentment on someone else's affection.

He gritted his teeth. "No. I suppose it doesn't. Well, that *sucks*, eh?"

Her eyes grew shiny as her gaze penetrated his, moving from one eye to the other for a long, silent moment. "Yes, it does."

She broke away from him then. She leaned down and picked up her bag, which she had flung onto the couch during her big entrance. “All right then, well. If you’re okay with it, then we’ll continue and, um, break up quietly after the wedding.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

And with that, she breezed out of his apartment. He was still staring at the closed door when his phone rang.

A quick look at the caller ID told him it was his brother. He picked up, in no mood to discuss this or anything with him.

“Yes, I’ll be in your damn wedding, okay?”

There was a brief pause before Noah’s dry voice came down the line.

“Don’t get all mushy on me now, Ry. You’re going to make me cry.”

NEW YORK MINUTE

Today's big news is another Victoria Ashby sighting, but this one doesn't involve Ryder Prince (we know, but we promise it's just as—well, okay, almost—as good).

Ms. Ashby was spotted out and about with none other than Sabrina Hopewell. For those who have been living under a rock for the last year, Ms. Ashby is Noah Prince's ex-longtime-girlfriend, and Ms. Hopewell is the surprise guest star who wooed him away. Oh, and she and Prince Charming are getting married in T-minus two months and counting. (But you knew that because surely you've already saved the date for the following week to gape at all the photos online.)

Vicky and Sabrina have been cordial to each other as far as we can tell. It's a sticky situation because Vicky still works with her old flame, of course. But if you thought these two ladies were faking it for the PR or that they'd scratch each other's eyes out if they had the chance, think again!

They were spotted casually lunching together, enjoying wine and more than one good laugh! Could these two be becoming *friends*? Shut up! It's so sweet, we can't stand it!

But wait, there's more—and it's a *doozy*! An anonymous source tells us they witnessed the whole thing, and they overheard Sabrina tell Vicky they want her and Ryder *to be in the wedding!!!*

Can you believe it? Neither can we!

Could these four end up as one big, happy family?

We're not gonna lie. We would eat. That. Up.

But is that too much to hope for? Sigh. Honestly? It might be.

But we can dream, right?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Vicky sat at her desk, browsing the online portfolio of a Brooklyn-based sculptor who worked in recycled materials. Her work would be perfect for the new initiative Vicky wanted to put together. It was an idea that had been percolating since that day in the park with Ryder. Bringing artists and kids together—on the kids’ turf—with free access to materials and inviting anyone who wanted to join in and create. She knew it could be big, important work. She’d been gathering resources—lists of local artists, locations that might work, and, of course, benefactors she thought might be interested—working to put it all together into a coherent proposal.

And she might have been avoiding thinking about Ryder too.

She hadn’t meant to fight with him. She was honestly still confused about why he was so upset. None of this had been what she’d intended.

Ugh, how had a clear, simple plan gone so far off the rails?

She knew how. She’d let her emotions get the better of her, that’s how.

And Ryder hadn’t helped by being such an amazing kisser either.

“Gaaaah.” She let out the strangled sound, then gently banged her head against the desk. She let it rest there, closing her eyes and taking a moment to gather herself. Or maybe it was more like wallowing.

“Knock knock?”

She turned her head to see Noah leaning in the open door, wearing a look of concern. She straightened up immediately, pasting a smile on her face.

“Good morning! What can I do for you?”

“Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I’m great!”

“I talked to Ryder yesterday, and he was in a *mood*, even for him. He said you’d just left.” Noah leaned in farther, and whispered, “Is everything okay with you two?”

Vicky kept the smile plastered on her face. “Mmm-hmm.”

Noah narrowed his eyes. “Okay ... But you know you can talk to me, right, Vicky?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Noah. We’re fine, though. Great! We’re really great. And so excited to be in the wedding!” She gave him a thumbs-up. Why the hell was she giving him a thumbs-up?

“Okay,” Noah said again. He looked her up and down before holding up a hand to say goodbye. She heard his footsteps retreat as he walked back down the hall toward his office.

Vicky swung her head down onto her desk and banged it gently again.



STANDING on the busy midtown corner, Ryder gazed down the block at the fifty-story gleaming Prince Resort Hotels headquarters building and swore to himself. Vic was up there.

He did not want to be here.

He didn’t want to see her, even though he knew that since their little arrangement was continuing, he’d be seeing her more than once between now and Noah’s looming wedding.

He supposed he could have backed out of the whole thing, but he could never do that to her. Not if she really needed him. And she'd made it clear she did. Being needed and wanted were two different things, though.

The wind kicked up, and he turned up his collar at the crisp air. The weather and his place as the outsider were back to normal, it seemed.

Well, almost. Because he still had to be in his brother's bloody freaking wedding. It was why he was here.

Noah had called earlier that morning, insisting he come to the Prince offices for his tux fitting. He'd argued against it, but Prince Charming had already arranged for the tailor to come there for his own fitting during his lunch hour, and since Ryder "had nothing important to do," it was on him to accommodate his brother's schedule.

He spewed a stream of expletives under his breath, earning him a stare from an elderly woman walking past. He flashed her an ingratiating smile. She just shook her head and moved on. *Yeah, you and everyone else, lady.*

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. A text from Noah.

Remember, I only have an hour for lunch. I hope you're close.

Ryder shook his head and shoved the phone back into his pocket without bothering to answer. Better just to get this the hell over with. He started walking up the street, toward the entrance. If he was lucky, maybe he wouldn't run into Vicky at all.



HE WAS NOT LUCKY.

He stepped off the elevator and smack into Vicky, striding down the hall with her nose in a printout. She looked up about half a second before literally walking into him and froze.

“Ryder.”

Judging by the wide eyes and open mouth, he guessed Noah hadn't mentioned to her that he'd be coming by. Ryder was suddenly acutely aware of the dozen or so people who could see them from their desks, the copy room, standing by the elevator.

“Hello, sweetie,” he said. He bent to kiss her cheek.

Still not recovered from the shock of seeing him, Vic looked even more (adorably) confused at his show of affection. He glanced over at a few of their onlookers. He could see the moment it clicked. Suddenly she smiled wide.

“What a pleasant surprise! What are you ... Why? ... Did you want something?”

He thought about pointing out that dropping by to see his girlfriend was a perfectly normal thing to do, since he was her *boyfriend* and all, but he put her out of her misery.

“I'm just here for a suit fitting. You know, for the wedding.”

“Oh. Oh, right! Well, don't let me keep you!” She leaned in awkwardly, planting a kiss on his cheek.

When she pulled back, she locked eyes with him, and for a second, all the pretense was gone. Her expression was tender, concerned. Maybe a little apologetic.

“Vic ...”

Someone cleared his throat behind him. Noah.

Vicky's eyes shot over Ryder's shoulder to his brother. The false smile snapped back onto her face.

“Well, I'll let you get to your fitting!” she chirped. She whirled back in the direction of her office before he even had a chance to consider responding.

Behind him, Noah leaned in close to his ear. “I'd like to have a word with you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Could you give us a few minutes, please?” Noah asked the tailor the instant he entered the room. The older man, busy unpacking tape measures, pins, and the like from a carrying case looked back and forth between Ryder and Noah before clearly deciding it was best to obey. He nodded and scurried out of the room.

“Bullying innocent craftsmen, Noah? This isn’t like you.”

“Cut the crap, Ryder. I don’t know exactly what’s going on between you and Victoria, but I do know she’s been upset the last few days, and it doesn’t take much imagination to guess it has to do with you.”

Of course, obviously good ol’ good-for-nothing Ryder would be the cause of any upset.

“That’s good,” he bit out, “because you never did have much imagination, did you?”

His little bro did something very uncharacteristic then, he got right in Ryder’s face. Glaring, eyes boring into his, Noah hissed, “Do not screw her over, Ryder. She’s vulnerable.”

Ryder wanted to quip back with something snappy like *Whose fault is that, Noah?* But he couldn’t because the more important point was Vic. He took a deep breath, then he spoke with as much careful control as he could muster.

“Vicky’s not vulnerable at all. She’s the most self-possessed person I know. She’s compassionate, creative, and unbelievably driven. If you look at her and see some frail

flower, then I don't care how long the two of you were together. You don't know her at *all*."

Noah blinked back at him in stunned silence.



VICKY HADN'T *MEANT* to be eavesdropping. Okay, maybe she had tiptoed back toward Noah's office as soon as they'd gone inside so she could try and see how things were going between the two men. And maybe she was currently hiding in a little alcove behind a large potted fern. But that wasn't what was important right now.

What was important was what Ryder had just said. He thought she was ... well, a lot of things she'd been second-guessing lately. Since the breakup, really. Somehow losing her boyfriend hadn't been the real blow. She'd lost her confidence. Without Noah, she wasn't sure she really was the competent, pulled together, go-getter she'd always fancied herself.

But here was Ryder, saying otherwise. Warmth spread through her chest, and suddenly her throat felt tight. He believed in her even when she didn't know if she did.

Inside the room, the men had gone silent. That couldn't be good.

Vicky inched closer, slipping halfway out of the alcove and pretending to inspect the plant's leaves for signs of overwatering as she strained to hear what was going on in Noah's office. She waited to hear whispered threats or, God forbid, the sound of fist against face as the two finally came to literal blows.

What she didn't expect was for Ryder to come storming out into the hall.

"Where are you going?" Noah's voice called from inside the room. "You have a fitting."

Ryder stopped and spun around. "I'll send the tailor my measurements."

“This is so like you! Very mature, big brother!” Noah yelled. But Ryder kept walking.

Vicky was frozen, half behind the fern, half not when Ryder glanced in her direction and did a double take. Their eyes locked, and in the split second she had to make a decision, her hand decided for her, reaching out to grab his arm and pull her into the hidden alcove with her.

But once they were there, she was on her own. And because it was not a hidden alcove built for two, she was basically pressed against him.

She looked up into his eyes. They were so close she could feel his breath on her cheek. They just stared at each other for a moment.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

He looked caught between confusion and amusement. And, God, his eyes were beautiful.

“Did you mean that?” she blurted.

“Hi’? Yeah, sure, I meant it.”

“Not that. What you said to Noah. About me.”

“Oh.” He searched her eyes for a moment. Then he said, barely above a whisper, “I did.”

“Thanks,” she breathed.

Their gazes were locked. She could feel his body heat coming off him. And was it her imagination, or was his face just a little closer to hers than it had been a minute ago?

“Vicky, I—”

“Gotta go! I ... I gotta go. I have ... paperwork ... to do ... in my office.”

She barely registered Ryder’s—Startled? Hurt?—look before she pushed past him, out into the hall.

Feeling the flush rising on her neck, she gave quick nods to the various staff members who greeted her as she rushed to

her office as fast as her heels would carry her.

She closed the door behind her, sat down at her desk, and closed her eyes.

“Paperwork? I have paperwork?!” She swore under her breath.

Still sitting there alone, eyes shut as if maybe the outside world would just disappear if she kept them that way long enough, Vicky jumped when a notification sounded from her computer. She opened her eyes.

She had set up her email notifications to alert her to important emails. Important donors, heads of state, and ... Davis! This one was from Davis!

She read the subject line: *Davis King has sent you an ecard!*

An ecard? A freaking *ecard*?!

She clicked the link in the email and was met with a photo of a puppy with googly eyes pasted over the real ones, holding a bouquet of daisies. The caption read, “Finking of you.” Because puppies can’t pronounce the word “thinking.” Get it? Haha.

At the bottom of the screen a link flashed in obnoxious neon: *Send Davis King a thank you for his card!*

Vicky snapped. She snatched up her phone and hit “call.”

“Hey,” came Davis’s bright, cheery voice down the line. “Did you get my ecard?”

“Yep.” She didn’t even try to hide her irritation.

“You didn’t like it?” He sounded puzzled. “But you sent me an ecard.”

“I did. To wish you good luck on an important meeting. Not as a substitute for actual personal interaction.”

“Victoria, I-I’m sorry. I guess I hadn’t thought about—”

“Oh, I’m sure you hadn’t thought about it. You haven’t thought about anything but theme parks and licensing

agreements and global expansions since the day I met you!”

There was a stunned silence. Finally, Davis said, “You’re right. I’ll make it up to you.”

How, she wondered? Was he going to commission a time machine so they could go back in time to the night of the Pink Heart Ball and make sure none of this ever happened?

She sighed. “No, Davis. I’m sorry. Your work is important to you. I understand that. I’m just having a day. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure? I could—”

“I’m sure. I’ll talk to you soon.”

She hung up.

Well. That was ...

Pointless.

Oh God, what was wrong with her? She needed to get a grip. Now she was venting all her frustration at Davis? None of this was Davis’s fault. She groaned.

She opened up her messages app and sent him a quick heart emoji, just to make sure they were good. He sent one back immediately. There, all good.

Except she was still in her ex’s wedding along with her fake boyfriend who she kept kissing and who she’d practically swooned over when he’d stood up for her. While her (almost) boyfriend was on the other side of the country, “finking” about her. But other than that, things were great.

She glanced up at the clock on her computer screen. And she was due at a party featuring her ex-boyfriend, her fake boyfriend, their mom, and two hundred of New York’s elite in just a few hours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Rainbow Room was humming with activity even though the guest of honor had yet to arrive. The place was just as he remembered it. Crystal chandeliers glowed above, and drinks flowed into the finest crystal stemware below. Mom was going to love her surprise party, even if she hadn't been surprised by one of these things in a couple of decades.

Ryder had gotten there uncharacteristically early himself. Hell, being there at all was out of character. At least the other guests were leaving him mostly alone. They must have gotten out most of their judgmental commentary at the engagement party. Or else they were so disgusted with him at this point they'd just decided to pretend he was invisible.

He'd definitely get points from Cheryl for showing up—and before she made her grand entrance! Not that that was why he'd done it. He was there because Vic had asked him to meet her there, and apparently, he now did everything he could to please her. He didn't dare risk being late.

He was so confused. He was supposed to still be seeing Vicky, that part of their arrangement was clear. But what their *actual* relationship was now, he had no idea.

All right, fine. He had some idea. He was into her. If he was honest, he may have been into her a little bit for years. And he had really thought she was into him. Not historically, obviously, but over the last few weeks.

He was rarely wrong about such things. Then again, the women in question were usually not too subtle. And none of them were anywhere near as sophisticated as Vicky.

As if he'd conjured her, Vicky appeared, gorgeous as always, wearing a fitted dress in deep blue that made her eyes seem to sparkle honey-gold. She was making her way through the sea of revelers, smiling and chatting with various people along the way. Any discomfort or frustration she'd felt with how this crowd had treated them at Noah's engagement party was gone. Or at least any outward sign of it was. She was a pro at this. People. Society. Always poised and in control. He knew she'd been insecure lately, but he didn't get it. She was a force of nature.

Women like Vicky didn't end up with guys like him. He knew that.

Didn't make him want her any less, though.

Was he really planning to keep playing the family screw-up forever? If you'd asked him a month ago, he'd have said sure. But if Vic wanted him to play nice permanently—if Vic wanted *him*—he just might do that for her.

The big question was, what did she want?

There was only one way to find out.

He threw back his drink, set it down on a passing waiter's tray, and walked straight up to her. She was talking to several of his mom's club friends.

"Excuse me, ladies." He gave them a smooth smile before turning to Vicky, resting his hand on her arm. "Can we talk?"

"I ..." She glanced back at the circle of middle-aged women around her, blushing. Of course, she wouldn't want to appear rude by abruptly leaving the conversation. He should have thought of that. But frankly, what he had to say felt too urgent to wait anyway.

"Please," he said softly, trying to convey with his eyes how important it was that he speak to her. He turned to the others. "My apologies, I ... It's ... I really need to speak to her."

He expected them to scoff or mutter disparaging remarks under their breath, but something in his expression must have worked some kind of magic—they were all gazing at him with soft if bemused expressions.

“Go on, Victoria,” one of them said. They all nodded.

“O-okay, I guess. It was nice chatting with you all.”

Ryder gave them a quick nod. Somewhere in the room someone yelled, “I just got a text. The Princes are on their way up!”

He didn’t have much time. He had to do this now, before his parents arrived and they had to go greet them and perform all the other social BS that would be expected of them. Who knew how long it would be before they got another opportunity to talk alone?

With new determination, he yanked Vic to his side, pulling her along until they reached a relatively empty section along the windowed wall. He let go of her arm, turning to face her. She gazed up into his eyes.

“What is it, Ryder?”

“It’s ... I ...” God, this was so much harder than he’d thought it would be. He looked away, ran his hand through his hair.

What if she laughed? What if she was furious at him for deviating from the plan? What if—

It didn’t matter. He had to try. He hadn’t seriously wanted anything in forever. He wanted this.

He took both her hands in his and held her gaze. “Vic ...”



VICKY SEARCHED RYDER’S EYES. What was he going to say?

It felt like a moment. It felt like this was going to be a huge moment. Was that just her?

Was he ... Did he want ... Was he feeling what she'd been feeling? Was that even possible? She leaned in closer. "Yes?"

"I ..."

"Elevator's here! Here they come!" yelled a woman near the entrance as she ducked behind a serving cart.

There was movement at the top of the stairs, and everyone yelled, "Surprise!"

But instead of Cheryl and Warren stepping down to enter the room, there was just one person.

A very sheepish-looking Davis King.

He waved to the crowd. "Sorry, everyone. I don't think I'm who you were expecting."

He was definitely not who Vicky had been expecting. How was he here? *Why* was he here?

She turned back to Ryder as if maybe somehow he would have the answers and found him staring at Davis with an unreadable expression. His jaw ticked.

She glanced back to find Davis scanning the room. His gaze fell on her, and he smiled. She must have looked confused because he held up his phone, and mouthed, "Tracking app."

"Who is this fellow?" boomed a man's voice. Warren and Cheryl stood on the steps behind Davis, having apparently slipped in without anyone noticing. Only to find an uninvited guest (who they clearly didn't recognize) the focus of everyone's attention.

Davis cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly. "I'm Ms. Ashby's date, I hope."

Ryder was still holding her hands. He gripped them harder now. Or maybe she was the one holding tighter.

A confused murmur spread through the crowd. People were staring. At Davis. At Ryder. At her.

Somewhere off to the side a light flashed, momentarily blinding her.

“Vic?” Ryder whispered in her ear now, his breath warm on her skin. But she couldn’t pull her attention away from the scene across the room.

Davis was here? Davis ... wanted to be her date?

“I don’t understand,” said Cheryl, her brow knit as she looked back and forth between her son and the woman she thought was his girlfriend and this newcomer.

Vicky stood paralyzed.

And then her hands were cold. Ryder had let go.



HE HADN’T ASKED the question, but he had his answer. His answer had arrived in a three-piece suit and shave so clean he must have had it done on the plane and was probably squeezing this in between trillion-dollar deals.

This was the guy that belonged with Vicky. This was what she wanted.

And no matter how much of a bastard the world thought he was, he would never do anything to ruin Vic’s chance to get what she wanted.

She clearly didn’t know how to handle the situation. So he handled it for her.

“It’s easy, Mom,” he said, crossing the floor. “Vicky and I aren’t together. We never were. Vic here was trying to make me respectable, but clearly, that’s not possible.”

“I knew it! I knew this couldn’t be real!” Noah’s voice echoed through the silent room. Sabrina slapped him across the chest, fixing him with a glare.

“That’s right, bro. I’m the same old screw-up you always thought I was. All of you,” he added, turning to the room, then back to Noah. “No way a woman like Vic would be with a screw-up like me.”

With that, he strode to the stairs, stopping just long enough to give a stunned Cheryl a kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday, Mom.” He ignored the death scowl his father aimed at him and continued up the stairs and out of the room.



VICKY’S first impulse was to follow him. Her feet actually took several steps without her consciously telling them to. Maybe she could catch him at the elevators. Maybe she could tell him—

Tell him what? She didn’t even know what she was feeling except confused. And more importantly, what did her feelings matter when he clearly didn’t want her?

Sure, maybe he didn’t mind kissing her in a dark alley. Or a tiny bathroom. Or on the roof. Definitely not on the roof.

But she’d been so swept up, just moments ago, that she’d imagined he was going to say ... What? That he wanted to *be* with her? For real? What was the matter with her?

They’d made an agreement, and he’d more than held up his part.

He didn’t want her. Of course, he didn’t. She was boring vanilla commitment and wealthy New York society—shopping at Tiffany and lunch at Tavern on the Green and dancing at the Pink Heart Ball. Everything he’d left behind.

And she didn’t want him. Not really. She wanted ...

“Hi.”

“Davis.” She startled. He had apparently woven his way through the crowd and was now standing in front of her. “You’re here.”

“I am. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s—how are you here?”

“I thought about what you said on the phone earlier. You were right. If we’re going to give a relationship a try, I need to

be here with you more. Be here *for* you more.”

She gazed up at him, trying to catch up. Her brain was stuck somewhere back at Warren bellowing, “Who is this?”

“So you came?”

“So I came. Some brilliant woman suggested we share our locations on our phones, or I’d probably be wandering the streets of Manhattan, calling your name.” He winked.

She smiled weakly. “That was your suggestion. I just made a joke about needing assistance to keep track of your travels.”

“Ah, yes. Well, either way.” He chuckled gently. Then his expression turned serious. “It was the least I could do. You’ve been so committed to making this work. I haven’t been fair to you.”

It was everything she could have hoped he’d say and yet ...

All she could think about was the man who had just walked out on her oh-so-dramatically in what was sure to be tomorrow’s biggest headline.

It didn’t matter that Ryder didn’t want her. Or that if she was honest, she’d been fighting an attraction to him all along. For years maybe.

“Davis,” she said, suddenly seeing everything so clearly, “I haven’t been fair to *you*.”

He knit his brow. “Victoria, no. You’ve been so patient. I’m at fault here.”

“It’s not that. It’s ... I like you, Davis. I respect you. I hope we can continue to collaborate, in a professional capacity. I hope we can remain friends.”

“Victoria?”

She lay her hand affectionately on his cheek. “I’m sorry, Davis. There’s someone else.”

“Oh. *Oh*.” He looked down. “I see. Well. I probably deserve that. And ... I certainly wouldn’t want to stand in the way of your happiness. Go then. Go be with this other man.”

She gave him a sad smile. "I can't. But I am going to try to be happy."

NEW YORK MINUTE

Holy *bleeep*. Well, folks, we had planned to bring you elegant if bland coverage of Cheryl Prince's big birthday celebration at the Rainbow Room.

And in a way, we still are, but ...

(No offense to the lovely Mrs. Prince, who gets more beautiful and charming with each passing year—you know you do, honey.) But the big news last night concerned another Prince all together.

Now, we don't have the *full* scoop (or any pictures—sob) because the party was strictly invite-only. But Ryder Prince left (his own mother's birthday party!) early (now *that* seems like the Ryder we all know and love). And—drumroll—Vicky Ashby did *not* leave with him.

Mr. Prince *was* spotted by reporters in the lobby stomping out of the elevator with a big ol' scowl on his face. Asked if he and Ms. Ashby were still together, Mr. Prince simply said, "No."

Sigh.

While we will admit to being somewhat relieved the world seems to make *sense* again, we have to say we're just the tiniest bit disappointed. We were kinda enjoying the weird, wild ride that was "Ryctoria."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next morning, Vicky woke with a sense of purpose. Yes, she was sad. Ryder was gone. Davis was gone. She had let go of an idea she'd had so long she hardly knew how to separate herself from it. The idea that she needed someone to hold her up, to be her other half. The idea that she couldn't succeed on her own. In business. In life.

It was a thought that had formed long ago, so far back she couldn't remember it. It was almost certainly the thing that had kept her with Noah so long, even though there was clearly more affection than spark there. That much was obvious when you looked at him and Sabrina. She tried to imagine herself and Noah planning a rushed last-minute wedding because they couldn't wait another minute to get to the altar. She couldn't. Of course, she couldn't. They'd never felt that kind of passion for each other.

The kind of passion she felt for Ryder.

As screwed up as the whole situation was, he had helped her more than he'd ever know. He had helped her realize she didn't *need* the perfect, stable guy at her side. Not to succeed in her career or in anything else. He'd also helped her realize that perfect and stable might not be the things that were most important to her after all.

For now, though, she intended to throw herself into her work. She planned to put together a proposal to launch the Art in the Park initiative as soon as next year. She was confident it was going to make a big impact on kids across the city (and

maybe across the country after that). It was another thing she had Ryder to thank for. Maybe she could ask him to be involved, once she had more of the details worked out. She was sure he'd have better things to do, supermodels to go out clubbing with, that sort of thing. A widely publicized charitable campaign was a far cry from incognito art with kids on the street. It wasn't his style. But she hoped he'd be flattered. She hoped he'd be proud of what she'd made. He'd inspired it after all.

Her first stop was the Princes' apartment. She waited until she knew Warren would be down at the club.

Cheryl's face warmed with affection the minute she opened the door. She pulled Vicky into a hug.

"Sweetheart, how are you? I've been so worried about you."

Vicky choked back a sob. "I'm so sorry, Cheryl. I'm so sorry I lied to you."

The older woman pulled back, taking her face in both her hands. "Please don't be. I'm not upset about that at all. Come, sit down."

She pulled Vicky inside, taking her coat and leading her into the living room. She sat down beside her on the sofa and took her hands. "Victoria, I'm not mad about the lie. I understand why you did it. I only wish you hadn't felt it necessary."

She didn't trust herself to speak just yet, so she simply nodded. Cheryl took a tissue from the side table and dabbed at Vicky's eyes like a mother would do with her child. It only made Vicky's heart ache more.

"And I should have realized how hard Noah's engagement would be for you."

"I ... It's okay, though. I'm okay now."

Cheryl smiled. "I know. And I'm glad. You and Noah have been so important to each other over the years. Look at everything you've done together, your work with the

foundation. You two are good for each other, even if it's not in the roles you once had."

Vicky nodded.

Cheryl sighed. "I'm still sad, though."

"Please don't be. Your son's getting married! This should be such a happy time for you."

"Oh, it is. I'm over the moon for Noah and Sabrina. But I'm sad for you and Ryder. I really thought you were going to make each other happy."

That she had thought something similar, even if in brief, ill-advised, fleeting fantasies did not escape Vicky. She chuckled. "Yes, well ..."

"Whatever happened with the two of you—even if it was all pretend—you've been good for him." She held up a hand as if sensing Vicky's objection. "Not a good *influence*. I just mean good for him. So thank you. I know I don't always understand his choices, but he's still my boy, and I just want him to be happy. I just want you to be happy, too, baby girl."

This time Vicky knew she wouldn't be able to speak without dissolving into tears, so she just threw her arms around this dear, dear woman and let them come anyway.



IN THE TOWN car on the way back from seeing Cheryl, her phone rang. She glanced at the screen. She'd been expecting the call.

"Hello, Daddy."

"Are you okay, Pumpkin?" His voice was gruff on the other end of the line. If she'd thought he was going to gloat, she'd been wrong.

"I guess you saw the news?"

He grunted.

“I’m all right.” She waited for him to tell her she was too good for someone like Ryder and that she was better off without him.

But instead, he just said, “I’m sorry, honey. I know you liked him.”

He didn’t have the whole story by a long shot, but what he said was true enough. “Yeah, I did.”

“His loss.”

She felt tears prick the back of her eyes. She was not going to let herself cry again. “I’m surprised it took you this long to call. I thought I’d hear from you the minute the story hit the blogs.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, well. Took me a while to get up the courage.”

“Ah.” She grinned.

“I’m sorry, Pumpkin. For everything I said last time we talked. You know I just want you to be happy. Truly. Even if it is with some hooligan.”

She laughed. She could hear the wink in his voice. “Thanks, Daddy.”

“Okay, enough about that. Why don’t you tell me all about what you’ve been working on lately?”

“Well, actually, I’m really excited about this new project I’ve just started ...”



A FEW DAYS LATER, Vicky stepped through the door of a nondescript coffee shop. Sabrina, seated at a little table in the corner, spotted her immediately.

“Hiiiiii,” she said, standing to wrap Vicky in a huge hug. Vicky had deliberately chosen an out of the way spot to try to give them a little privacy, but of course, a few customers were staring.

They both took their seats, leaning in across the table conspiratorially.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Vicky said.

“Of course! I was worried about you, after ... you know.”

Sabrina truly was such a genuine person. Noah had really found a gem.

“I’m okay. Thank you, though.” She dug into the shopping bag she’d brought with her and pulled out a wrapped box. “I wanted to give you this.”

Sabrina looked confused, so she elaborated. “It’s your shower gift. Just some bath oils and candles I thought would suit you, but if you don’t like them, I left the receipt so you can return them.”

“I’m sure they’re fantastic, but why not give them—”

Vicky held up her hand. “I won’t be at the shower.”

“Oh.”

“And more than that. Sabrina, I’m so honored that you and Noah wanted to include me in your wedding, but I can’t do it. I just can’t. It’s too hard. Not,” she said when she saw Sabrina’s expression, “I mean, not watching Noah marry you. I am absolutely, unequivocally so happy for you both. I just don’t belong up there, you know? I’m not *really* part of the family.”

Sabrina opened her mouth as if she might object but stopped herself. She studied Vicky for a long moment.

“Do you miss him?” she asked, and Vicky knew she didn’t mean Noah.

“I do,” she admitted.

Wordlessly, Sabrina stood and pulled Vicky into another hug. Vicky sank into it, resting her head against the shorter woman’s wild poof of blond hair.

Somehow in this whole crazy fiasco, she had gained a friend. And for that, she was grateful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ryder was doing the noble thing and letting her go. He didn't have a lot of experience doing the noble thing (and even less giving enough of a shit for there to even *be* a noble thing), but so far, it was pretty miserable.

He'd let himself wallow for a few days—he assumed that's what you'd call him sleeping till two and ordering takeout and not bothering to get dressed; he didn't have a lot of experience wallowing either.

But today he had thrown on his Professor McNobody outfit and headed out to the park. He figured he couldn't stay in his apartment forever, and frankly, he wanted to see the kids. They knew him. They liked him. They didn't judge. The only people like that he had in his life. At least now that Vic was gone.

Most of the regular kids were there, shooting baskets. Ryder settled onto his usual bench and took out his sketch pad. The air was brisk, the sky a brilliant blue. It felt good to be outside, if not completely out of his head. A few tiny flowers had started to bud along the grassy borders of the park. He started to sketch them absently, but somewhere along the way the drawing turned into a sketch of Vicky's profile. Pathetic.

"Yo, Mr. R!" James dropped to sprawl on the bench next to him. Ryder hadn't even heard him approach.

"Hey."

The kid leaned over to look at his work. “Nice! Where’s she at today?”

It was an innocent question, but to Ryder, it felt like a punch to the gut. Still, not James’s fault. He attempted a careless shrug. “She’s not going to be coming here with me anymore.” What’re gonna do, right?

“Oh.” James looked suddenly serious. “Dude. I’m sorry.”

It ought to have been laughable that this kid was offering him sympathy over a woman at the ripe age of fourteen, but Ryder would take what he could get.

“Thanks, man.” Beside him, the teen shifted awkwardly. “James?”

“Promise you won’t get mad?”

What could he possibly get mad about? “Sure.”

“She came around here. I was talking to her. We-we all were. She wanted to know all about the art stuff we been doing. Something about a big project she wants to start with a bunch of artists and stuff. I swear, we thought she was your friend. If we knew you guys were over, we wouldn’t of given her the time of day.”

Vicky was putting together an art initiative? He was floored. Then he was flattered. She must have gotten the idea when he’d brought her here. His lips stretched slowly into a grin. Well, he’d be damned. She’d do an amazing job, of course. Take his casual afternoon getaways and turn them into something that would make a difference for hundreds, probably thousands of kids.

“Good for her, James. Good for her.”



WHEN RYDER GOT BACK to his building, his mother was there waiting for him. She didn’t say she’d been waiting for him, but he recognized the town car out front, and she arrived at his

door a mere five minutes after he'd walked in. He had given up on asking the doorman not to let people up.

He hadn't spoken to her since his big exit on the night of her party. On the one hand, he wasn't sure how he felt about his mommy checking up on him. On the other hand, after roughly a decade of being left alone, he didn't entirely mind. Especially since it seemed like she came in peace.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said, kissing his cheek. "How are you? I brought you cookies."

She pulled a plastic container from the tote bag she was carrying.

"You ... baked?" Cheryl was a famously terrible cook. But if she'd gone to the effort, it could only mean she was really trying to make a gesture.

She placed the cookies on the kitchen counter, turned to look at him, and sighed. "Ryder. What you said at my birthday ..."

He sighed. He really shouldn't have made a scene.

"Mom, I'm sorry—"

"No!" she said, startling him. "No. Please don't be sorry. That's not it at all."

He eyed her uncertainly. "Okay ... Why don't you tell me what it is then?"

"You called yourself a 'screw-up.'" She winced as if the words were distasteful. "But you're not."

He laughed ruefully.

She shook her head. "I *hate* how disconnected we've been. Since you grew up really. It's our fault, your father and I. You always wanted to do your own thing, and I don't think we ever really knew what to make of that. And then you just left us behind, and I didn't know how to make it better. But you have, you know. It means so much that you've been here these past weeks, showing up for your brother and all the wedding business. I *know* none of this is your thing."

“I didn’t really do any of it for Noah, Mom.”

She cupped his cheek with her hand. “I know, dear.”

He wanted to ask exactly what the knowing glint in her eye was supposed to mean, but she stepped away to open the cookie container and continued speaking.

“And what you and Victoria did, what you felt you needed to do to make up for ...”

Ah. “The scandal of me crashing the Pink Heart Ball and kissing her in the alley? Mom, if you’re here to tell me I shouldn’t have done that, I *know*—”

“No! That’s just it.” She handed him a cookie. “There’s *nothing* wrong with you coming to the ball or kissing Victoria.” She looked him straight in the eye. “Sweetheart. There’s nothing wrong with *you*. You know that, right?”

He looked down at his cookie. Chocolate chip, but it probably tasted like dirt. A lump was forming in his throat, but he ignored it. He was a grown-ass man. He was not going to cry in front of his mom.

She breathed out a shaky breath herself. “There’s nothing wrong with you at all, and I’m so sorry if we ever made you feel like there was.”

He didn’t trust himself to talk, so instead, he pulled her into a hug. She relaxed into him, her breath shuddering slightly. After a respectable minute or so, she pulled back. It was an awful lot of affection for them all at once.

“How about some coffee, Mom?”

“I would love that.”

He busied himself in the kitchen as she sat on one of the stools at the counter. After a moment, she said, “I saw Victoria, you know.”

He paused but did not look up. “How is she?”

“She’d be better if she saw you.”

That was most definitely untrue.

“Mom ...”

She held up her hand. “No, no. You’re right. It’s your business. I need to let you do your own thing, whether I understand it or not. This is me, shutting my mouth.”

She grabbed a cookie and took a bite.

“Oh!” She made a wrinkled face. “These are awful.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. And after a moment, she began laughing too.

It was nice, laughing with his mom.



AFTER EVERYTHING that had gone down, Noah had been keeping his distance at the office. It wasn’t awkward or anything like that—surprisingly—he just seemed to sense that Vicky needed space. She was grateful.

Still, later that week, he appeared at her office door. She couldn’t blame him. Prince Charming types have trouble not looking in on potential damsels in distress.

“So,” he said. “How are you really?”

She smiled. “I’m really fine.”

He narrowed his gaze playfully. “You realize I’ve known you since we were twelve, right?”

She relented. “I’m okay.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’m really happy for you, Noah. You know that, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah!” he said. “I could tell by the way you backed out of being a bridesmaid and then refused to even attend the wedding.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I just ... I think it’s for the best. And ... we’re okay, right? You and me.”

He nodded. “We are, yeah.”

“Good.”

They stayed silent for a long moment. His eyes began to bore into hers. After years of friendship and then more and then friendship again, she knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“I just wish you could be happy too.”

“I’m not *unhappy*.”

“You know what I mean.”

She sighed. She did know. “I will be, I think. Just probably not today.”

“I worry about you.”

“Please don’t. Worry about your wedding. Worry about how you’ll no longer qualify for the top eligible billionaires list after you get married.”

He laughed. “Oh God, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“See? You have much more important things on your mind than little ol’ me.”

“I know I wasn’t exactly supportive, but ...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You actually seemed really happy with him.”

“It was fake, Noah.”

“Does that make a difference?”

She looked down at her desk, fiddling with a stack of papers there. Maybe she had been happy. Maybe a fake relationship could turn real. But Ryder had had more than enough opportunity to tell her if he wanted more. And he hadn’t. He’d gone along with their deal until it didn’t make sense anymore, and then he had left. He’d done more than she could have reasonably expected him to, frankly.

“I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. He clearly wasn’t happy with me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The day of the wedding was warm and clear, gorgeous weather for an outdoor event, but Ryder was mostly concerned with trying to figure out the damn bow tie Noah was making him wear.

He stood in the dressing room at the Delacorte Theater, regarding himself in the lightbulb-framed mirror.

Best man. How had he gone from loner black sheep to best man?

Except, of course, he knew how. Vicky.

“The trick is to get a woman to tie it for you.”

He looked up to see his father’s reflection, approaching him from behind.

Things had warmed considerably between him and his mother, and even Noah and he had navigated a sort of cautious truce. But his dad ... Well, his dad was his dad.

“Yes, well. I don’t have one of those at the moment.”

“Should I send your mother in?”

“I’ll manage.”

Warren took him by the shoulders and turned him roughly. For an instant, Ryder braced for some kind of confrontation, but instead, the older man merely set about trying to fix the dangling fabric around his neck.

“I ought to be able to do something with it. I’ve been dealing with them myself long enough.”

Ryder eyed his father as he worked on the knot. He looked worn around the edges. Not so formidable as he'd once seemed.

It had probably been more than twenty years since Ryder had stood so close to him. Before the money had turned him into The Warren Prince. Before resentment had turned him into The Ryder Prince.

His dad looked up suddenly, finished with the tie, and caught Ryder watching him. He held his gaze for a moment. It wasn't the usual harsh Warren Prince stare. It was something more tender. Something that reminded Ryder of a whisper of a memory. Of being a little boy.

"There," the older man said, looking away. And Ryder thought maybe he imagined the whole thing.

But when they both turned to inspect his handiwork in the mirror, Warren caught his eye again. He slapped his hand roughly on Ryder's shoulder. "I'm glad you're here, son."

And as weird and screwed up and bittersweet as the journey had been to get him there, Ryder realized that he was too.



VICKY SAT AT HER DESK, willing her mind to focus on the spreadsheet in front of her and not the ceremony taking place a couple dozen blocks uptown.

It was Saturday evening, and the place was deserted. She ought to go home, but she needed the distraction.

She had chosen not to go, she reminded herself. Friends or not, Noah really didn't need his ex there on his big day. And she didn't need to see Ryder. Not now. It was too soon.

Besides, the empty office was the perfect opportunity to work on these funding statistics. She clicked on a column, resorting the numbers, and tried to focus on the endless numbers.

Her eyes caught the clock at the top of the screen. Just after seven. The ceremony was set for eight o'clock, just as the sun set, providing what was sure to be a gorgeous backdrop for the outdoor event.

The guests would be arriving soon. The wedding party was probably already dressed. Noah had assured her he'd convinced Ryder not to wear motorcycle boots as he had apparently threatened.

She smiled to herself.

He'd look good even if he did wear them.

She caught herself and squeezed her eyes shut. There was no picturing Ryder looking good in his tux, dammit. This was not productive.

She'd think about Sabrina instead. She would look so beautiful in her gown, Vicky was sure of it. Even though she had removed herself from bridesmaid duties, her new friend had sent her a few selfies from her fitting. As if *her* opinion mattered to someone getting a custom Vera Wang design for God's sake.

It was gorgeous, of course.

She felt a little pang. She was so glad things were good with her and Noah and Sabrina. And the Princes *had* been practically like family to her. She did feel just the tiniest bit of longing to be there.

No.

Spreadsheet, dammit. God, what was wrong with her?

Now if she could just move around enough funding to commission a second collage artist, she could host simultaneous events ...

... The thing was, she *couldn't* go to the wedding. She'd already told everyone she wouldn't be there, and the thought of having to face them . . . Not to mention the attention she'd draw if she crashed the wedding unannounced. No. She was much better off here ...

All right, she could probably take a portion of the money earmarked for supplies later in the year and allocate that toward the collage artists.

... Still, if she could just be a fly on the wall, just see everyone without raising a fuss ...

Or maybe she should simply move the collages to a later event and focus on something simpler that required fewer supplies—like pencil sketches—for the earlier dates.

... If only there were a way she could be there without anyone knowing she was—

Her eyes, which had been wandering along with her thoughts, stopped on her gym bag in the corner of the room. The zipper was open just an inch or so. And peeking out from inside was the faded brim of an old baseball cap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Vicky ducked her head and shuffled along the outer aisle of the open air theater, grateful that the large number of guests made it possible to slip in without drawing too much attention. She'd almost been stopped by the security detail at the doors. But fortunately Noah had mentioned the decision to hold the wedding at the theater had meant they had to employ a stage crew to handle the lighting and set pieces that were already in place for the first production of the season. In her ball cap, yoga pants, and oversized hoodie, she'd been able to convince them she was a staff member, late for work. Good thing she'd never gotten around to returning Ryder's clothes from that day at the park.

The stage was dominated by a huge wall of metal stairs and platforms. It should have been dark and imposing (it would be in a week, when *Hamlet* opened), but it was offset by the thousands and thousands of flowers that were hung on every rail and bar. Vicky smiled to herself. Sabrina was nothing if not creative.

The audience was maybe a quarter full—even that must have been several hundred people. The constant murmur of the excited guests had been enough that Vicky hadn't drawn any attention to herself as she'd moved along the edge of the theater.

Then a woman in robes—the minister, she supposed—stepped out onto the stage. The lights changed, rendering the background scenery in deep blues and purples and focusing all

attention on the area just in front of the central spiral staircase. The audience grew quiet.

It was breathtaking.

The minister gave a little nod, and music began playing from somewhere.

The audience looked around expectantly. But Vicky saw them first. Noah and then Ryder entered from the top of the spiral stairs. Ryder held himself tall as he followed his brother to the altar. No motorcycle boots. And, yeah. He looked *good*.

The lights shifted, and now a lovely Black woman in an elegant lavender dress, her hair laced with flowers, appeared at the top of a long staircase on the far side of the set. Sabrina's best friend, Ava, the maid of honor.

Vicky watched her descend the steps gracefully and was even more glad she had decided to back out of the ceremony. She adored Sabrina and was glad they had forged their connection. But without her in the picture, Sabrina and Noah had opted for a more intimate ceremony, with just the one attendant each. It felt right, each of them joined by one special person. Sabrina with Ava. Noah with, of all people, Ryder. Her heart squeezed, seeing the two of them there for each other after all these years.

Also, she never would have gotten down those metal stairs in heels without falling on her face. Ava was a marvel.

Ava arrived at the altar, the theater suddenly silent as the sound of her footsteps stopped and the music that had accompanied her faded out.

This was it. Vicky's throat tightened. A tear rolled down her cheek.

This could have been her. Her walking down the aisle toward Noah. She had imagined it so many times.

And now that she was here—a mere anonymous observer, even—she knew that *this* was right. *This* was what was meant to be, and she was so, so overcome with sheer joy for her friends and the happiness they'd found.

She bent to dig in the pocket of her hoodie. Why hadn't she thought to bring tissues? It was a wedding for God's sake.

A bright light flicked on in her periphery, and she heard the collective shuffling of the crowd rising from their seats and turning.

Forget the tissue. She just wanted to see the bride, and then she'd sneak out. She didn't want to stay too long and risk someone noticing her.

She dabbed her eyes on the sleeve of her hoodie and then froze. She had expected Sabrina to enter from backstage, through the scenery as the others had. But she was making her entrance—on her father's arm—from the back of the theater. And perhaps because there was no straight aisle down the center like in a church, they were headed for the side aisle. The side aisle Vicky was currently standing in.

Sabrina and her dad paused at the top of the steps as the music changed and a spotlight faded up on them. Then they began to descend the stairs.

Vicky yelped.

Then she clamped her hand over her mouth and ducked. She hunched low, hidden from the rest of the audience by the backs of the empty seats beside her. She looked around. Fortunately between the fading sunlight and everyone's focus on Sabrina, no one seemed to have noticed her.



ALL EYES WERE ON SABRINA, but Ryder was looking for the source of that yelp.

He'd have recognized the comical squeal anywhere (though it helped that Vic had made a very similar noise clamoring down from the fountain that day at Lincoln Center).

She was there. She'd come.

Not that it meant anything. So she'd come to see her friends get married. That wasn't surprising. And it *didn't* mean

she'd come to see him.

Though the yelp was strange. Had she been coming in late and stumbled on her way to her seat? Was she okay?

He scanned the crowd for her, looking for her sleek, black hair. She was taller than average and, of course, drop-dead gorgeous. It ought to have been easy to spot her. Where was she?

Noah noticed his distraction and nudged him, but Ryder ignored him. His attention was caught by a movement off to the side.

There!

She was crouching behind a row of seats, wearing ... Was that his baseball cap?

Their eyes locked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*H*e was looking. Right. At. Her.

Even from thirty yards away she was pulled in, drowning in his deep-brown eyes. God, she missed him.



NOAH HISSED. “Ryde, what in the name of—” He stopped when he glanced in the direction Ryder was looking.

Vic looked both ridiculous and adorable, hiding behind the seats in what looked like it could have been her high school gym outfit.

The corner of Ryder’s lips curled up in a lopsided smile.

Slowly, she started to smile back. Then she stopped, her mouth flat, her brow knit.

Then she bolted.



SHE HAD NO idea what she’d been thinking. She’d almost smiled at him. What was she going to do next? Wave? Run up on stage and throw herself at him so that he had to call security to pull her off? He was probably laughing at her right now. Showing up at the wedding like some kind of stalker. And she was dressed like a lunatic. Although that was really his fault. Him and his stupid witness-protection gimmick.

She had to get out of there. She didn't have a plan other than run and pretend this never happened. Admittedly, it didn't feel foolproof, but now wasn't the time to iron out the kinks.

Since the audience was to her left, a wall to her right, and the *bride* above her (and headed slowly but surely in her direction, along with a spotlight and everyone's attention), Vicky opted to flee down the stairs and into the first opening she could find, which turned out to lead backstage.

She almost immediately came face-to-face with an enormous and terrifying puppet, draped in yards of raggedy fabric.

She screamed.

Her mind supplied the useful but not so important information (dredged from her freshman Shakespeare class no doubt) that there was a ghost in *Hamlet*, and this was probably him.

"Excuse me," she whispered to the ghoulish figure—because that's how jumbled her thoughts were—and then she climbed past him. There had to be an exit back here somewhere.

Outside, the music continued, so that was a good sign. Maybe her pretend-this-never-happened plan would work after all, she thought, gingerly picking her way around a rack of stage swords. She could get Noah to convince Ryder he'd been imagining things. That it couldn't possibly have been her.



"THAT WAS HER," Noah whispered to him.

"That was definitely her."

Still standing, facing his approaching bride, Ryder's brother slid his eyes to the side to study him.

"You want to follow her."

Of course, he wanted to follow her. He had only stayed away because that's what he thought she wanted. He'd been

doing the right thing, he thought. Giving her the space to do what she wanted. She hadn't come to him, even after she'd sent Davis King packing. She was, by all reports, doing great on her own. She would have told him if she wanted more.

Wouldn't she?

He shook his head. "She's just here for your wedding."

The groom now turned to him. He smirked. "If she was just here for the wedding, why did she feel the need to *sneak in incognito*?"

He made a fair point.

She hadn't wanted to be seen. She hadn't wanted people to know she was there. Hadn't, he realized suddenly, wanted *him* to know she was there.

But the way she had looked at him ...

And then he remembered how unsure she'd been of herself. For all her conviction and talent and skill, she hadn't been sure she could stand on her own. Hadn't been sure she could face Noah's engagement alone. Hadn't felt like she could just let the press write what it would and simply not care what people thought.

She lacked confidence. It was inexplicable, considering she was so ridiculously competent. And she had come a long way in the past few months from what he could see. But she was still, fundamentally, insecure.

She was scared. Was she scared of him?

No, not of him. Of ...

Of whatever had been growing between them.

"Have you told her how you feel?" Noah broke into Ryder's thoughts.

He blinked.

Offstage, in the direction Vicky had disappeared, there was a loud crashing sound.

Halfway down the stairs, Sabrina and Mr. Hopewell exchanged a confused look. They paused for a second, but when no further sounds were heard, Sabrina smiled wide and nodded to her dad. They resumed their progress toward the stage.

Ryder turned to look at the exit Vic had disappeared through. A dim blue light glowed partway down the dark hall. And damn it all, he wanted to follow her before she disappeared into the night. Before he lost his nerve. Before she moved on to someone clean-cut and worthy who didn't land her in the gossip pages again and again.

But there was the small matter of his brother's wedding currently in progress. And causing a huge, embarrassing spectacle by doing something like walking out to chase after a woman seemed like exactly the sort of thing he'd decided to stop implicating his family in.

Besides, what if he was wrong and she didn't want him anyway?

"Ryder," Noah breathed. "Go."

He really wanted to.

But he looked back at his little brother—whose big day it was—and for the first time in a long time, he actually didn't want to mess things up for him.

"Noah. It's your wedding."

"I am aware."

At the edge of the stage, Sabrina's father kissed her cheek and headed to his seat. She hesitated, looking back and forth between the Prince brothers. They kept their voices low, although when Ryder glanced over his shoulder, he realized the minister was listening with rapt attention.

"Bro, I don't want to ruin your wedding. You'll remember this day forever." He tossed his chin back toward Sabrina. "Your *wife* will remember this day forever."

Noah glanced between his very confused-looking bride and his brother for a moment. Then apparently, he came to a

decision. He grabbed Ryder by his lapel and pulled him close.

“You’ll ruin my wedding if you screw up this chance, and *that’s* how I’ll have to remember this day forever.” Ryder searched Noah’s eyes, his heart racing. “And Sabrina is a huge sap who would never forgive me if I didn’t make you do this. You know, after I explain it all to her.”

Ryder looked back at the hallway Vicky had disappeared down. It had been two, maybe three minutes. He could probably still catch up with her, but only if he left right now. “Are you sure? Sabrina won’t kill me?”

“Oh, yeah. Ava can vouch for her too. Right, Ava?”

Oh good God, he’d been so caught up in everything he’d completely forgotten the maid of honor was also standing within earshot.

She nodded enthusiastically, though. “Oh, hell yeah! For true love? Pff. She’d be outraged if you didn’t go.”

True love?

Huh. True love ...

Noah slapped him hard across the chest. “Go!”

Right. Ryder nodded once, turned, and ran for it. He got as far as the edge of the stage.

“Whoa!” Sabrina held up her bouquet.

She was fairly terrifying for a tiny woman in a poofy dress, and whoever was doing the music took this as their cue to pause. If they hadn’t been before, all eyes were now on him.

“He’s going after Vicky!” Noah shouted.

“She was here! She came to see him!” added the minister enthusiastically.

“He loves her!” screamed Ava.

Ryder, who it was safe to say had built a reputation around being as unselfconscious as it got, felt his face flush.

Sabrina leaned in close so only he could hear. “Do you?”

He cleared his throat. “Yeah. I think I might.”

She blinked. Then she beamed. “Then what are you waiting for?”

He gave her a peck on the cheek and darted down into the hallway Vic had fled through. Behind him, he heard Sabrina yell for the music to start again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Vicky rounded a corner and came to an abrupt stop at a heavy door marked “boiler room.” Another dead end. This was getting ridiculous. There had to be a way out. Weren’t there fire codes or something? She had had to switch hallways after knocking over a bunch of swords in her path. She knew some poor staff member was going to have to clean up after her, and she felt awful, but it couldn’t be helped. She had, however, made a mental note to make a large donation to the Public Theater to make up for her path of destruction. Which wouldn’t matter much if she never made it out of here ...



WELL, the big scary puppet explained the scream he’d heard. Ryder stepped carefully around it and continued on.



DOWN ANOTHER HALLWAY, Vicky tried a door. The knob turned ...

Oh for the love of God! It was that storage room full of lumber. She had been here before!

How did she end up here again? She was going to have to double back.



GOOD LORD, how many swords had the woman knocked over? It was like pick-up sticks in here but with weapons. Stage weapons, he assumed. They shouldn't be sharp. Right?

Maybe he would just try to avoid them just in ca—

He caught his pant leg on one of the swords and went down right onto the haphazard pile, sending a cacophonous clatter echoing through the empty corridors.



VICKY FROZE. Someone was in here with her. Was someone following her? What if it was security? Or the police? Or ...



“VIC?” Ryder called out. He had heard footsteps approaching. Not too far away, he thought.



RYDER!

She gasped.

No, no, no.

She turned and ran down the nearest corridor.



FOOTSTEPS RETREATED RAPIDLY. Ryder scrambled up from the pile of tinny blades.



WHAM! Vicky slammed into a large man in black wearing a headset. He eyed her strangely.

“Are you ... here for the wedding?” he said, covering his mic with his hand.

“I-Is there an exit somewhere? Out to the park?”

The man nodded. “End of the hall, then turn left.”

“Thanks!”

She sprinted for the door.



“EXCUSE ME.” Ryder panted as he approached a large man with a headset. “Have you seen a woman running through here? Possibly in search of an exit?”

The guy looked him up and down as if assessing whether it was wise to share this information with a random dude he found chasing through the backstage passages. Then he raised a brow.

“Aren’t you the best man?”

“It depends who you ask.”

He didn’t seem to know what to do with that but evidently decided Ryder wasn’t a threat because he raised an arm and pointed behind him. “Down and to the left.”

“Thanks, man.” Ryder slapped him on the shoulder.

He started to jog after Vicky, then slowed, deciding maybe a quieter approach was better if he didn’t want to spook her.



VICKY PAUSED to catch her breath. She listened but heard no sign of anyone following her.

She hadn't found the door the man had indicated, but she had stumbled on an enormous rack of costumes.

She thumbed through the fabrics. Gorgeous period dresses and coats, along with some capes and robes that would be easy enough to throw on over her current outfit.

Would taking one make it easier to evade Ryder? If she took one of these with the hood, she could walk right past him. Though did she want to add stealing—borrowing—to her list of transgressions today?

“If you're trying to blend in, Elizabethan is probably not the way to go.”

His voice was hushed and husky, reverberating through the empty space.

Every cell in her body melted just a little.

“Vic ...”

She wanted to turn around. She did. She wanted to look at him and touch him and collapse into him.

She also desperately wanted to escape. So when a door swung open behind the rack of costumes, another black-clad headset wearer stepping in, by the smell of it, from a smoke break outside, Vicky ran.



SHE GOT about ten strides away from the building before she realized she had run straight at a crowd.

What could only be described as a *throng* of people had gathered, spilling out from the front of the entrance where, presumably, security was keeping them at a distance, and wrapping around to the side of the amphitheater. Police tape stretched between the building and nearby trees to cordon off the area. People carried signs that said things like “We <3 You, Noah” and “Sabrina + Prince Charming 4evah.” One woman

had a T-shirt of Noah's face. And one earnest-looking young man held up a small sign that read, "Team Ryctoria."

Vicky skidded to a halt.

Maybe she could scurry out through the trees.

"Hey, you there! You're not supposed be back there! They already threatened to arrest—" The overzealous gentleman who had been offering her his advice stopped and squinted at her. "Hey, you know you kinda look like—"

"Omigod, it's him! It's Ryder Prince!!" shrieked a teenage girl before actually, literally, swooning. The crowd flocked around her, momentarily distracted.

"This is *definitely* not what I'd call blending in, princess."

He had stepped up behind her, so close she could feel his warmth at her back. She squeezed her eyes shut. "No?"

"Why'd you run, Vic?"

"I don't know. I was embarrassed."

"And this is less embarrassing?"

The girl who had fainted had gotten back on her feet. Someone gave her a water bottle. And the crowd slowly turned its attention back to them, watching quietly as if trying not to spook a pair of rare, exotic animals.

Vicky dissolved into a fit of nearly silent giggles. "Yes?"

Ryder stepped around in front of her, shielding her from the crowd. He leaned in close so that only she could hear. "I've missed you."

There was no point in denying it. "I've missed you too."

"Vic, I"—God, she loved it when he called her Vic—"I'm pretty sure I have other feelings about you too."

She searched his eyes and nearly got lost in their depths. They were full of strength and vulnerability, earnestness and trust. He was nothing she had ever planned for ...

... and everything she could possibly want.

She swallowed hard. “I might have some feelings of my own.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded.

“Okay. Okay. I have a proposition for you. A plan, really. ’Cause I know how you like plans.” He cleared his throat. “But I don’t know how you’re going to feel about the idea.”

She looked up at him from under the brim of his baseball cap. He was grinning his lopsided grin. “Go on.”

“Well, to avoid this problem of us missing each other—not to mention the problem of requiring disguises in order to attend important family events—we will spend time in each other’s company, be seen out and about, kiss whenever we damn well please, do other things whenever we damn well please”—he wagged his brows—“and not give a damn whether it ends up in the gossip pages or not.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm?”

“Well ... That’s a lot of damns.” She gave him a mischievous smile.

Behind them, the whispers were growing louder.

“What are they talking about?”

“Can anyone get a good angle for a photo?”

“Are you sure that’s her? It looks like a teenage boy.”

Vicky and Ryder stood stock-still, a breath apart, locked in a staring contest where the stakes felt higher than high.

She could run again. She could probably ask him to distract the crowd while she made an escape, and he would. She could, she realized, do whatever she wanted here. She could even be brave.

She grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him against her. They crashed together, his mouth against hers, her body tight against his. A cheer erupted from the crowd, nearly deafening.

A camera flashed. Then another. Not phones, professional cameras. Paparazzi. Probably even the legitimate press, there to cover the wedding.

Ryder's arms wrapped around her, pulling her in. Her hands slid up under his jacket, and he groaned. His hand pushed the cap from her head, letting her hair cascade down. His fingers combed through it.

More flashes. More cheers. An appreciative whistle.

They pulled away, breathless, foreheads leaning together.

"Damn," he said.

NEW YORK MINUTE

You. Guys. You guys you guys you guys.

Ryder Prince and Victoria Ashby are officially—*officially*—a thing.

Seriously, there are about a million witnesses. Plus, Ms. Ashby herself confirms they are, and we quote, “romantically involved.”

Like there was any doubt after the scene in Central Park yesterday (pictures below—but crank up the a/c if you’ve got it because they are *steamy*).

We *also* have it on good authority (a.k.a. Cheryl Prince) that the estranged Ryder has reconciled with his family. Does all this mean we won’t be getting any more photos of his royal hotness gallivanting across the clubs of Europe with questionable companionship?

If it means relationship bliss for our new favorite couple, we’ll take it! (And Ryder, baby, honestly, we’d much rather see you happy than scandalous. Well, assuming we have to choose, that is ...)

Also ... *huge* congratulations to Noah Prince and Sabrina Hopewell-Prince, who, of course, tied the knot yesterday (photos of the joyous occasion and Sabrina’s fab-beyond-measure wedding gown in the society section). Apologies for getting caught up in the *other* Prince couple on your big day. We hope you’ll forgive us ... But you of all people surely know there is nothing, nothing, nothing so appealing as a happy ending.

EPILOGUE

“*H*iiii!” Sabrina ran to Vicky, enveloping her in a huge hug the second she and Ryder stepped through the door of Cheryl and Warren’s apartment. “Thank God you two are here. Warren won’t stop talking about his retirement portfolio, and Noah’s too polite to say anything.”

The petite blonde stood on her toes to give her brother-in-law a peck on the cheek. “Oooh, Ryder, I *like* the five-o’clock shadow thing you’ve got going on.” She squinted at him. “You think Noah could pull it off?”

“No,” Vicky and Ryder said in unison. Sabrina laughed.

They walked on through to the living room where the others were deep in the investment conversation Sabrina was trying to avoid. Cheryl lit up as soon as she saw them. “There you are!” She kissed them each on the cheek. “So? How was it?”

Vicky bit back the huge smile that practically wanted to burst out of her. “I think it went pretty well. Ryder?”

He rolled his eyes, the side of his mouth curving up. “It was amazing. Of course, it was amazing.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Now she beamed.

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to his side, kissing the top of her head. “I expected no less.”

They had spent most of the day at the Art in the Park opening events—a dozen separate happenings around the city

—and in all five boroughs—giving kids from toddlers through teens the opportunity to make art. Foundation staff was collecting detailed data on attendance, age ranges, and which locations and art media proved most popular so they could improve their model for the future dates. But it had already been clear the undertaking would be an enormous success. Vicky couldn't wait to start planning for the next phases of the project. And Ryder, who had taken on a role as one of their main artists-in-residence, was clearly in his element out working with the kids.

She looked over at him, looking so much more like himself than he had this time last year in a black T-shirt and jeans, dragon tail snaking down his muscular forearm, hair just a bit long and just a bit unruly. He was at ease here in his parents' home in a way he hadn't been since they'd been kids. The year had been good to both of them.

“Well, that's wonderful.” Cheryl smiled. “I'm so happy for you both.”

“What's that?” Warren finally stopped talking about annuities long enough to notice their arrival.

“I was just telling our son and his lovely girlfriend how glad I am their arts initiative is taking off.”

“Oh. Well, yes, yes. That's very good.” He came around the sofa to greet them but stopped when he saw Ryder. “Is that what you wear to family dinner?” He eyed the tattoo winding out from under his son's short T-shirt sleeve with open distaste.

“Yeah, Dad, I guess it is.” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

Warren groaned but shook his hand, then planted a kiss on Vicky's cheek. “I don't see why you feel the need to put your artwork onto your body, that's all.”

Maybe she just wouldn't mention the little princess crown Ryder had designed for her. It wasn't anywhere anyone else was likely to see it anyway.

Noah came around with a warm hug for her and a collegial slap on the back for Ryder. She was never, never ever going to

get tired of seeing them act like, well, brothers.

Vicky looked over and caught Ryder's eye, raising her brow slightly in a silent question. He nodded.

"So ... we actually have some news."

The room went silent.

Sabrina grabbed Noah's hand, her eyes darting excitedly between Vicky and Ryder. She actually squealed as she bounced up and down. Noah wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Easy, sweetie, you're going to hurt yourself."

"Sshh! Let them talk!" she hissed.

"Oh my goodness." Cheryl's eyes had misted over. "Oh! You're getting married, aren't you?"

Ryder glanced over at her. "Uh ..."

"They are! I knew it! They are!" Sabrina was full-on jumping now.

"You kids aren't going to pull another rushed wedding, are you?" said Warren. "Damn near drove Cheryl crazy last year trying to get the invitations out."

"No," began Vicky. "Actually, we—"

Cheryl all but tackled her into a soggy hug. "Your mother would be so happy for you, Victoria."

The older woman dissolved into tears. Vicky patted her gently on the back until she pulled away, wiping her eyes. "Oh, look at me. There's so much to do. A venue, caterers, the cake of course—a dress! Oh, Vicky, you're going to make such a lovely bride! Where's my schedule book? We ought to start thinking about an engagement party first, of course. But photos for the newspaper announcement are probably our top priority ..."

Noah chuckled. "You're sure you want to join this family? Voluntarily?"

Cheryl was now frantically rummaging through drawers, presumably looking for her schedule book or other wedding-planning supplies she kept at the ready.

Vicky threw Ryder a frantic look. He shrugged.

“Wait,” said Sabrina. “So where’s the ring?”

Ah, yes, the ring. Well, that was one way to clear things up.

Vicky held up her hand, revealing the simple gold band on her finger.

Sabrina looked confused. “Well, that just looks like a ... wedding ring.”

Cheryl stopped fussing. The room went still. Ryder held up his hand, revealing his own new piece of jewelry.

Sabrina screamed and bounded over to them, squeezing them both in a giant hug.

Noah shook his head. “Well done, you two, well done. Congrats.” Sabrina yanked him into the group hug. He didn’t fight her.

“You ... You eloped?” Oh, poor Cheryl.

“I’m sorry,” Vicky said, breaking away from the group. “We just ... We talked about it, and it’s what felt right to us.”

Ryder came and put his arm around Vicky’s shoulders.

Cheryl looked back and forth between them for a moment before clasp her hands to her mouth. Her eyes turned glassy again. “You’re married!”

“You okay, Mom?”

“I’m just so happy for you!” And with that, she burst into tears once more.

Warren came over and planted a kiss on his wife’s forehead. “I’ll get the champagne!”

Ryder slipped his hand in hers. She leaned her head against his shoulder. They were finally, both, exactly where they belonged.

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Chaperoning the Billionaire*. I hope you enjoyed it!

If you have a minute, I'd love for you to leave a quick review.

... And then be sure to keep turning pages for a couple special treats.

(LATER AT SABRINA & NOAH'S
WEDDING ...)

Vicky turned as the door swung open and Ryder slipped into the dark backstage room she'd been waiting for him in.

“What did they say?”

“They were fine with me heading out.” He pulled her close, drawing her into a kiss.

Mmm. She could definitely get used to kissing him. And she planned to. But ...

“Really?” She pulled back. “Because you already missed the ceremony. Ryder, I don't want to mess things up for you and your family. Not when you've just gotten them back.”

He bent down and planted a kiss on her nose. “Really. They couldn't get rid of me fast enough.”

“But—”

“Not like all those other times they couldn't wait to see me go. In a go-be-with-that-amazing-woman way.”

Her insides turned gooey. Still ...

“It doesn't feel right. Maybe we should just pop into the reception for an hour or so.”

“Like this?” He flicked his eyes down to her less-than-couture ensemble. Right. She'd forgotten about that.

“Good point.” Plus, with him looking down at her like she was not only the only woman in this glorified storage closet, but the only woman in the world ... hobnobbing with a crowd

of five hundred didn't sound particularly appealing right now. She yanked him in by the collar. "Screw it."

They kissed for a good five minutes, lazily losing themselves in each other, until all rhyme and reason and sense of the passage of time had melted away.

Ryder pulled back, resting his forehead against hers. "You want to get out of here?"

"Yeah." She smiled to herself. "I think our work here is done."

"Listen, the crowd and the press are probably mostly gone by now, but we still might be spotted. I'll ditch the jacket and tie. That ought to help. But I can't make any promises."

He loosened the bow at his neck, and she was momentarily distracted by his jawline.

Yeah, he was definitely, obviously Ryder Prince. Anyone who saw them would know it in an instant. "Ooh! I'm wearing your hoodie. Here, take it."

She pulled down the zipper, shrugging her arms out of the sleeves. When she glanced up, Ryder was watching her with a crooked smile.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just ... is that a Star Trek shirt?"

She glanced down at the insignia now visible on her otherwise nondescript T-shirt. She looked back up at him, quirking a brow. "What can I say? I am a woman of many layers."

He stepped in close, wrapping his arms around her. "That you are." He grinned as he drew her in for a warm, soft, delicious kiss that felt like coming home.

SWEET & SWOONWORTHY
BILLIONAIRE BONUS

Want more Ryder and Vicky? Sign up for my newsletter and get an exclusive bonus flashback scene! Read about their very first dance ...

Get Your Copy:

<https://BookHip.com/RZZTTGK>

BOOKS BY LAURIE BAXTER

Sweet & Swoonworthy Billionaires

Billionaire for Christmas: A Short Story

Driving the Billionaire

Chaperoning the Billionaire



The Wedding Photo (Novella)

Who Does He Think He's Fooling? (Novelette)



Cute Shorts Series

The Rescue (Cute Shorts #1)

Ferry Godfather (Cute Shorts #2)

Blindsided (Cute Shorts #3)

A Charlie Browne Christmas (Cute Shorts #4)

Cyberella (Cute Shorts #5)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Baxter has degrees in both puppetry and screenwriting because let's face it, majoring in English would have been no more useful and way less fun. She loves chocolate, ice cream, chocolate ice cream, dogs, New York City, old movies, modern architecture, all kinds of theater, and music from before she was born. Her eighth grade English teacher told her to become a writer, so she did.

lauriebaxter.com

